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THE NEW DECAMERON

THE NEW DECAMERON

THE THIRD VOLUME, CONTAINING
STORIES BY

COMPTON MACKENZIE
J. D. BERESFORD
D. H. LAWRENCE
DESMOND COKE
MICHAEL SADLEIR
NORMAN DAVEY
STORM JAMESON
ROBERT KEABLE
V. SACKVILLE WEST
AND
BILL NOBBS

OXFORD
BASIL BLACKWELL
1922

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THE POET'S TALE

WINTRY PEACOCK

By D. H. LAWRENCE

THERE was thin, crisp snow on the ground, the sky was blue, the wind very cold, the air clear. Farmers were just turning out the cows for an hour or so in the midday, and the smell of cow-sheds was unendurable as I entered Tible. I noticed the ash-twigs up in the sky were pale and luminous, passing into the blue. And then I saw the peacocks. There they were in the road before me, three of them, and tailless, brown, speckled birds, with dark-blue necks and ragged crests. They stepped archly over the filigree snow, and their bodies moved with slow motion, like small, light, flat-bottomed boats. I admired them, they were curious. Then a gust of wind caught them, heeled them over as if they were three frail boats, opening their feathers like ragged sails. They hopped and skipped with discomfort, to get out of the draught of the wind. And then, in the lee of the walls, they resumed their arch, wintry motion, light and unballasted now their tails were gone, indifferent. They were indifferent to my presence. I might

have touched them. They turned off to the shelter of an open shed.

As I passed the end of the upper house, I saw a young woman just coming out of the back door. I had spoken to her in the summer. She recognised me at once, and waved to me. She was carrying a pail, wearing a white apron that was longer than her preposterously short skirt, and she had on the cotton bonnet. I took off my hat to her and was going on. But she put down her pail and darted with a swift, furtive movement after me.

"Do you mind waiting a minute?" she said. "I'll be out in a minute."

She gave me a slight, odd smile, and ran back. Her face was long and sallow and her nose rather red. But her gloomy black eyes softened caressively to me for a moment, with that momentary humility which makes a man lord of the earth.

I stood in the road, looking at the fluffy, dark-red young cattle that mooed and seemed to bark at me. They seemed happy, frisky cattle, a little impudent, and either determined to go back into the warm shed, or determined not to go back. I could not decide which.

Presently the woman came forward again, her head rather ducked. But she looked up at me and smiled, with that odd, immediate intimacy, something witch-like and impossible.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Shall we stand in this cart-shed—it will be more out of the wind."

So we stood among the shafts of the open cart-

shed, that faced the road. Then she looked down at the ground, a little sideways, and I noticed a small black frown on her brows. She seemed to brood for a moment. Then she looked straight into my eyes, so that I blinked and wanted to turn my face aside. She was searching me for something and her look was too near. The frown was still on her keen, sallow brow.

"Can you speak French?" she asked me abruptly.

"More or less," I replied.

"I was supposed to learn it at school," she said. "But I don't know a word." She ducked her head and laughed, with a slightly ugly grimace and a rolling of her black eyes.

"No good keeping your mind full of scraps," I answered.

But she had turned aside her sallow, long face, and did not hear what I said. Suddenly again she looked at me. She was searching. And at the same time she smiled at me, and her eyes looked softly, darkly, with infinite trustful humility into mine. I was being cajoled.

"Would you mind reading a letter for me, in French?" she said, her face immediately black and bitter-looking. She glanced at me, frowning.

"Not at all," I said.

"It's a letter to my husband," she said, still scrutinising.

I looked at her, and didn't quite realise. She looked too far into me, my wits were gone. She glanced round. Then she looked at me shrewdly. She drew a letter from her pocket, and handed it

to me. It was addressed from France to M. Alfred Goyte, at Tible. I took out the letter and began to read it, as mere words. "Mon cher Alfred"—it might have been a bit of a torn newspaper. So I followed the script: the trite phrases of a letter from a French-speaking girl to an Englishman. "I think of you always, always. Do you think sometimes of me?" And then I vaguely realised that I was reading a man's private correspondence. And yet, how could one consider these trivial, facile French phrases private? Nothing more trite and vulgar in the world than such a love-letter—no newspaper more obvious.

Therefore I read with a callous heart the effusions of the Belgian damsel. But then I gathered my attention. For the letter went on, "Notre cher petit bébé—our dear little baby was born a week ago. Almost I died, knowing you were far away, and perhaps forgetting the fruit of our perfect love. But the child comforted me. He has the smiling eyes and virile air of his English father. I pray to the Mother of Jesus to send me the dear father of my child, that I may see him with my child in his arms, and that we may be united in holy family love. Ah, my Alfred, can I tell you how I miss you, how I weep for you? My thoughts are with you always, I think of nothing but you, I live for nothing but you and our dear baby. If you do not come back to me soon, I shall die, and our child will die. But no, you cannot come back to me. But I can come to you. I can come to England with our child. If you do not wish

to present me to your good mother and father you can meet me in some town, some city, for I shall be so frightened to be alone in England with my child, and no one to take care of us. Yet I must come to you, I must bring my child, my little Alfred, to his father, the big, beautiful Alfred that I love so much. Oh, write and tell me where I shall come. I have some money. I am not a penniless creature. I have money for myself and my dear baby——"

I read to the end. It was signed: "Your very happy and still more unhappy Elise." I suppose I must have been smiling.

"I can see it makes you laugh," said Mrs. Goyte, sardonically. I looked up at her.

"It's a love-letter, I know that," she said. "There's too many 'Alfreds' in it."

"One too many," I said.

"Oh yes.—And what does she say—Eliza? We know her name's Eliza, that's another thing." She grimaced a little, looking up at me with a mocking laugh.

"Where did you get this letter?" I said.

"Postman gave it me last week."

"And is your husband at home?"

"I expect him home to-night. He had an accident and hurt his leg. He's been abroad most of his time for this last four years. He's chauffeur to a gentleman who travels about in one country and another, on some sort of business. Married? We married? Why, six years. And I tell you I've seen little enough of him for four of them. But he always was a rake. He went through the

South African War, and stopped out there for five years. I'm living with his father and mother. I've no home of my own now. My people had a big farm—over a thousand acres—in Oxfordshire. Not like here—no. Oh, they're very good to me, his father and mother. Oh yes, they couldn't be better. They think more of me than of their own daughters.—But it's not like being in a place of your own, is it? You can't *really* do as you like. No, there's only me and his father and mother at home. Always a chauffeur? No, he's been all sorts of things: was to be a farm-bailiff by rights. He's had a good education—but he liked the motors better.—Then he was five years in the Cape Mounted Police. I met him when he came back from there, and married him—more fool me——"

At this point the peacocks came round the corner on a puff of wind.

"Hello, Joey!" she called, and one of the birds came forward, on delicate legs. Its grey spreckled back was very elegant, it rolled its full, dark-blue neck as it moved to her. She crouched down. "Joey dear," she said, in an odd, saturnine caressive voice: "you're bound to find me, aren't you?" She put her face downward, and the bird rolled his neck, almost touching her face with his beak, as if kissing her.

"He loves you," I said.

She twisted her face up at me with a laugh.

"Yes," she said, "he loves me, Joey does"—then, to the bird—"and I love Joey, don't I? I *do* love Joey." And she smoothed his feathers

for a moment. Then she rose, saying: "He's an affectionate bird."

I smiled at the roll of her "bir-rrd."

"Oh yes, he is," she protested. "He came with me from my home seven years ago. Those others are his descendants—but they're not like Joey—*are they, dee-urr?*" Her voice rose at the end with a witch-like cry.

Then she forgot the birds in the cart-shed, and turned to business again.

"Won't you read that letter?" she said. "Read it, so that I know what it says."

"It's rather behind his back," I said.

"Oh, never mind him," she cried. "He's been behind my back long enough. If he never did no worse things behind my back than I do behind his, he wouldn't have cause to grumble. You read me what it says."

Now I felt a distinct reluctance to do as she bid, and yet I began—"'My dear Alfred.'"

"I guessed that much," she said. "Eliza's dear Alfred." She laughed. "How do you say it in French? *Eliza?*"

I told her, and she repeated the name with great contempt—*Elise.*

"Go on," she said. "You're not reading."

So I began—"'I have been thinking of you sometimes—have you been thinking of me?'"

"Of several others as well, beside her, I'll wager," said Mrs. Goyte.

"Probably not," said I, and continued. "'A dear little baby was born here a week ago. Ah,

can I tell you my feelings when I take my darling little brother into my arms——'"

"I'll bet it's *his*," cried Mrs. Goyte.

"No," I said. "It's her mother's."

"Don't you believe it," she cried. "It's a blind. You mark, it's her own right enough—and his."

"No," I said. "It's her mother's. 'He has sweet smiling eyes, but not like your beautiful English eyes——'"

She suddenly struck her hand on her skirt with a wild motion, and bent down, doubled with laughter. Then she rose and covered her face with her hand.

"I'm forced to laugh at the beautiful English eyes," she said.

"Aren't his eyes beautiful?" I asked.

"Oh yes—*very!* Go on!—*Joey dear, dee-urr Joey!*"—this to the peacock.

"—Er—'We miss you very much. We all miss you. We wish you were here to see the darling baby. Ah, Alfred, how happy we were when you stayed with us. We all loved you so much. My mother will call the baby Alfred so that we shall never forget you——'"

"Of course it's his right enough," cried Mrs. Goyte.

"No," I said. "It's the mother's. Er—'My mother is very well. My father came home yesterday—from Lille. He is delighted with his son, my little brother, and wishes to have him named after you, because you were so good to us all in that terrible time, which I shall never forget.

I must weep now when I think of it. Well, you are far away in England, and perhaps I shall never see you again. How did you find your dear mother and father? I am so happy that your leg is better, and that you can nearly walk——' "

"How did he find his dear *wife*!" cried Mrs. Goyte. "He never told her that he had one. Think of taking the poor girl in like that!"

"'We are so pleased when you write to us. Yet now you are in England you will forget the family you served so well——' "

"A bit too well—*eh, Joey!*" cried the wife.

"'If it had not been for you we should not be alive now, to grieve and to rejoice in this life, that is so hard for us. But we have recovered some of our losses, and no longer feel the burden of poverty. The little Alfred is a great comforter to me. I hold him to my breast and think of the big, good Alfred, and I weep to think that those times of suffering were perhaps the times of a great happiness that is gone for ever.' "

"Oh, but isn't it a shame to take a poor girl in like that!" cried Mrs. Goyte. "Never to let on that he was married, and raise her hopes—I call it beastly, I do."

"You don't know," I said. "You know how anxious women are to fall in love, wife or no wife. How could he help it, if she was determined to fall in love with him?"

"He could have helped it if he'd wanted to."

"Well," I said. "We aren't all heroes."

"Oh, but that's different!—The big, good Alfred!—did you ever hear such Tommy-rot in

your life?—Go on—what does she say at the end?"

"Er—'We shall be pleased to hear of your life in England. We all send many kind regards to your good parents. I wish you all happiness for your future days. Your very affectionate and ever-grateful Elise.'"

There was silence for a moment, during which Mrs. Goyte remained with her head dropped, sinister and abstracted. Suddenly she lifted her face, and her eyes flashed.

"Oh, but I call it beastly, I call it mean, to take a girl in like that."

"Nay," I said. "Probably he hasn't taken her in at all. Do you think those French girls are such poor innocent things? I guess she's a great deal more downy than he."

"Oh, he's one of the biggest fools that ever walked," she cried.

"There you are!" said I.

"But it's his child right enough," she said.

"I don't think so," said I.

"I'm sure of it."

"Oh well," I said—"if you prefer to think that way."

"What other reason has she for writing like that——?"

I went out into the road and looked at the cattle.

"Who is this driving the cows?" I said. She too came out.

"It's the boy from the next farm," she said.

"Oh well," said I, "those Belgian girls! You

never know where their letters will end.—And after all, it's his affair—you needn't bother."

"Oh——!" she cried, with rough scorn—"it's not *me* that bothers. But it's the nasty meanness of it. Me writing him such loving letters"—she put her hands before her face and laughed malevolently—"and sending him nice little cakes and bits I thought he'd fancy all the time. You bet he fed that gurrl on my things—I know he did. It's just like him.—I'll bet they laughed together over my letters. I'll bet anything they did——"

"Nay," said I. "He'd burn your letters for fear they'd give him away."

There was a black look on her yellow face. Suddenly a voice was heard calling. She poked her head out of the shed, and answered coolly:

"All right!" Then, turning to me: "That's his mother looking after me."

She laughed into my face, witch-like, and we turned down the road.

When I awoke, the morning after this episode, I found the house darkened with deep, soft snow, which had blown against the large west windows, covering them with a screen. I went outside, and saw the valley all white and ghastly below me, the trees beneath black and thin looking like wire, the rock-faces dark between the glistening shroud, and the sky above sombre, heavy, yellowish-dark, much too heavy for the world below of hollow bluey whiteness figured with black. I felt I was in a valley of the dead. And I sensed I was a prisoner, for the snow was everywhere deep,

and drifted in places. So all the morning I remained indoors, looking up the drive at the shrubs so heavily plumed with snow, at the gateposts raised high with a foot or more of extra whiteness. Or I looked down into the white-and-black valley, that was utterly motionless and beyond life, a hollow sarcophagus.

Nothing stirred the whole day—no plume fell off the shrubs, the valley was as abstracted as a grove of death. I looked over at the tiny, half-buried farms away on the bare uplands beyond the valley hollow, and I thought of Tible in the snow, of the black, witch-like little Mrs. Goyte. And the snow seemed to lay me bare to influences I wanted to escape.

In the faint glow of half-clear light that came about four o'clock in the afternoon, I was roused to see a motion in the snow away below, near where the thorn-trees stood very black and dwarfed, like a little savage group, in the dismal white. I watched closely. Yes, there was a flapping and a struggle—a big bird, it must be, labouring in the snow. I wondered. Our biggest birds, in the valley, were the large hawks that often hung flickering opposite my windows, level with me, but high above some prey on the steep valley-side. This was much too big for a hawk—too big for any known bird. I searched in my mind for the largest English wild birds—geese, buzzards.

Still it laboured and strove, then was still, a dark spot, then struggled again. I went out of the house and down the steep slope, at risk of breaking my leg between the rocks. I knew the ground so

well—and yet I got well shaken before I drew near the thorn-trees.

Yes, it was a bird. It was Joey. It was the grey-brown peacock with a blue neck. He was snow-wet and spent.

"Joey—Joey de-urr!" I said, staggering unevenly towards him. He looked so pathetic, rowing and struggling in the snow, too spent to rise, his blue neck stretching out and lying sometimes on the snow, his eyes closing and opening quickly, his crest all battered.

"Joey dee-urr! Dee-urr!" I said caressingly to him. And at last he lay still, blinking, in the surged and furrowed snow, whilst I came near and touched him, stroked him, gathered him under my arm. He stretched his long, wetted neck away from me as I held him, none the less he was quiet in my arm, too tired, perhaps, to struggle. Still he held his poor, crested head away from me, and seemed sometimes to droop, to wilt, as if he might suddenly die.

He was not so heavy as I expected, yet it was a struggle to get up to the house with him again. We set him down, not too near the fire, and gently wiped him with cloths. He submitted, only now and then stretched his soft neck away from us, avoiding us helplessly. Then we set warm food by him. I put it to his beak, tried to make him eat. But he ignored it. He seemed to be ignorant of what we were doing, recoiled inside himself inexplicably. So we put him in a basket with cloths, and left him crouching oblivious. His food we put near him. The blinds were drawn,

the house was warm, it was night. Sometimes he stirred, but mostly he huddled still, leaning his queer crested head on one side. He touched no food, and took no heed of sounds or movements. We talked of brandy or stimulants. But I realised we had best leave him alone.

In the night, however, we heard him thumping about. I got up anxiously with a candle. He had eaten some food, and scattered more, making a mess. And he was perched on the back of a heavy arm-chair. So I concluded he was recovered, or recovering.

The next day was clear, and the snow had frozen, so I decided to carry him back to Tible. He consented, after various flappings, to sit in a big fish-bag with his battered head peeping out with wild uneasiness. And so I set off with him, slithering down into the valley, making good progress down in the pale shadows beside the rushing waters, then climbing painfully up the arrested white valley-side, plumed with clusters of young pine-trees, into the paler white radiance of the snowy upper regions, where the wind cut fine. Joey seemed to watch all the time with wide, anxious, unseeing eyes, brilliant and inscrutable. As I drew near to Tible township, he stirred violently in the bag, though I do not know if he had recognised the place. Then, as I came to the sheds, he looked sharply from side to side, and stretched his neck out long. I was a little afraid of him. He gave a loud, vehement yell, opening his sinister beak, and I stood still, looking at him as he struggled in the bag, shaken myself

by his struggles, yet not thinking to release him.

Mrs. Goyte came darting past the end of the house, her head sticking forward in sharp scrutiny. She saw me, and came forward.

"Have you got Joey?" she cried sharply, as if I were a thief.

I opened the bag, and he flopped out, flapping as if he hated the touch of the snow, now. She gathered him up and put her lips to his beak. She was flushed and handsome, her eyes bright, her hair slack, thick, but more witch-like than ever. She did not speak.

She had been followed by a grey-haired woman with a round, rather sallow face and a slightly hostile bearing.

"Did you bring him with you, then?" she asked sharply. I answered that I had rescued him the previous evening.

From the background slowly approached a slender man with a grey moustache and large patches on his trousers.

"You've got 'im back 'gain, Ah see," he said to his daughter-in-law. His wife explained how I had found Joey.

"Ah," went on the grey man. "It wor our Alfred scarred him off, back your life. He must 'a' flyed ower t' valley. Tha ma' thank thy stars as 'e wor fun, Maggie. 'E'd a bin froze. They a bit nesh, you know," he concluded to me.

"They are," I answered. "This isn't their country."

" No, it isna," replied Mr. Goyte. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, quietly, as if the soft pedal were always down in his voice. He looked at his daughter-in-law as she crouched, flushed and dark, before the peacock, which would lay its long blue neck for a moment along her lap. In spite of his grey moustache and thin grey hair, the elderly man had a face young and almost delicate, like a young man's. His blue eyes twinkled with some inscrutable source of pleasure, his skin was fine and tender, his nose delicately arched. His grey hair being slightly ruffled, he had a debonnair look, as of a youth who is in love.

" We mun tell 'im it's come," he said slowly, and turning he called :

" Alfred—Alfred ! Wheer's ter gotten to ? "

Then he turned again to the group.

" Get up, then, Maggie, lass, get up wi' thee. Tha ma'es too much o' th' bod."

A young man approached, limping, wearing a thick short coat and knee-breeches. He was Danish-looking, broad at the loins.

" I's come back, then," said the father to the son—" leastwise, he's bin browt back, flyed ower the Griff Low."

The son looked at me. He had a devil-may-care bearing, his cap on one side, his hands stuck in the front pockets of his breeches. But he said nothing.

" Shall you come in a minute, Master ? " said the elderly woman, to me.

" Ay, come in an' ha'e a cup o' tea or summat.

You'll do wi' summat, carryin' that bod. Come on, Maggie wench, let's go in."

So we went indoors, into the rather stuffy, overcrowded living-room, that was too cosy and too warm. The son followed last, standing in the doorway. The father talked to me. Maggie put out the tea-cups. The mother went into the dairy again.

"Tha'lt rouse thysen up a bit again now, Maggie," the father-in-law said—and then to me: "'Er's not bin very bright sin' Alfred come whoam, an' the bod flyed awee. 'E come whoam a Wednesday night, Alfred did. But ay, you knowed, didna yer. Ay, 'e comed 'a Wednesday—an' I reckon there wor a bit of a to-do between 'em, worn't there, Maggie?"

He twinkled maliciously to his daughter-in-law, who was flushed brilliant and handsome.

"Oh, be quiet, father. You're wound up, by the sound of you," she said to him, as if crossly. But she could never be cross with him.

"'Er's got 'er colour back this mornin'," continued the father-in-law slowly. "It's bin heavy weather wi' 'er this last two days. Ay—'er's bin north-east sin 'er seed you a Wednesday."

"Father, do stop talking. You'd wear the leg off an iron pot. I can't think where you've found your tongue, all of a sudden," said Maggie, with caressive sharpness.

"Ah've found it wheer I lost it. Aren't goin' ter come in an' sit thee down, Alfred?"

But Alfred turned and disappeared.

"'E's got th' monkey on 'is back, ower this

letter job," said the father secretly to me. "Mother 'er knows nowt about it. Lot o' tomfoolery, isn't it? Ay! What's good o' makin' a peck o' trouble ower what's far enough off, an' ned niver come no nigher. No—not a smite o' use. That's what I tell 'er. 'Er should ta'e no notice on't. Ay, what can y'expect."

The mother came in again, and the talk became general. Maggie flashed her eyes at me from time to time, complacent and satisfied, moving among the men. I paid her little compliments, which she did not seem to hear. She attended to me with a kind of sinister, witch-like graciousness, her dark head ducked between her shoulders, at once humble and powerful. She was happy as a child attending to her father-in-law and to me. But there was something ominous between her eyebrows, as if a dark moth were settled there—and something ominous in her bent, hulking bearing.

She sat on a low stool by the fire, near her father-in-law. Her head was dropped, she seemed in a state of abstraction. From time to time she would suddenly recover, and look up at us, laughing and chatting. Then she would forget again. Yet in her hulked black forgetting she seemed very near to us.

The door having been opened, the peacock came slowly in, prancing calmly. He went near to her, and crouched down, coiling his blue neck. She glanced at him, but almost as if she did not observe him. The bird sat silent, seeming to sleep, and the woman also sat huddled and silent, seeming

oblivious. Then once more there was a heavy step, and Alfred entered. He looked at his wife, and he looked at the peacock crouching by her. He stood large in the doorway, his hands stuck in front of him, in his breeches pockets. Nobody spoke. He turned on his heel and went out again.

I rose also to go. Maggie started as if coming to herself.

"Must you go?" she asked, rising and coming near to me, standing in front of me, twisting her head sideways and looking up at me. "Can't you stop a bit longer? We can all be cosy to-day, there's nothing to do outdoors." And she laughed, showing her teeth oddly. She had a long chin.

I said I must go. The peacock uncoiled and coiled again his long blue neck as he lay on the hearth. Maggie still stood close in front of me, so that I was acutely aware of my waistcoat buttons.

"Oh, well," she said, "you'll come again, won't you? Do come again."

I promised.

"Come to tea one day—yes, do!"

I promised—one day.

The moment I was out of her presence I ceased utterly to exist for her—as utterly as I ceased to exist for Joey. With her curious abstractedness she forgot me again immediately. I knew it as I left her. Yet she seemed almost in physical contact with me while I was with her.

The sky was all pallid again, yellowish. When I went out there was no sun; the snow was blue

and cold. I hurried away down the hill, musing on Maggie. The road made a loop down the sharp face of the slope. As I went crunching over the laborious snow I became aware of a figure striding awkwardly down the steep scarp to intercept me. It was a man with his hands in front of him, half stuck in his breeches pockets, and his shoulders square—a real knock-about fellow. Alfred, of course. He waited for me by the stone fence.

" Excuse me," he said as I came up.

I came to a halt in front of him and looked into his sullen blue eyes. He had a certain odd haughtiness on his brows. But his blue eyes stared insolently at me.

" Do you know anything about a letter—in French—that my wife opened—a letter of mine ? "

" Yes," said I. " She asked me to read it to her."

He looked square at me. He did not know exactly how to feel.

" What was there in it ? " he asked.

" Why ? " I said. " Don't you know ? "

" She makes out she's burnt it," he said.

" Without showing it you ? " I asked.

He nodded slightly. He seemed to be meditating as to what line of action he should take. He wanted to know the contents of the letter : he must know : and therefore he must ask me, for evidently his wife had taunted him. At the same time, no doubt, he would like to wreak untold vengeance on my unfortunate person. So he eyed me, and I eyed him, and neither of us spoke. He

did not want to repeat his request to me. And yet I only looked at him, and considered.

Suddenly he threw back his head and glanced down the valley. Then he changed his position and he looked at me more confidentially.

"She burnt the blasted thing before I saw it," he said.

"Well," I answered slowly, "she doesn't know herself what was in it."

He continued to watch me narrowly. I grinned to myself.

"I didn't like to read her out what there was in it," I continued.

He suddenly flushed out so that the veins in his neck stood out, and he stirred again uncomfortably.

"The Belgian girl said her baby had been born a week ago, and that they were going to call it Alfred," I told him.

He met my eyes. I was grinning. He began to grin, too.

"Good luck to her," he said.

"Best of luck," said I.

"And what did you tell *her*?" he asked.

"That the baby belonged to the old mother—that it was brother to your girl, who was writing to you as a friend of the family."

He stood smiling, with the long, subtle malice of a farmer.

"And did she take it in?" he asked.

"As much as she took anything else."

He stood grinning fixedly. Then he broke into a short laugh.

"Good for *her*!" he exclaimed cryptically.

And then he laughed aloud once more, evidently feeling he had won a big move in his contest with his wife.

"What about the other woman?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Elise."

"Oh"—he shifted uneasily—"she was all right——"

"You'll be getting back to her," I said.

He looked at me. Then he made a grimace with his mouth.

"Not me," he said. "Back your life it's a plant."

"You don't think the *cher petit bébé* is a little Alfred?"

"It might be," he said.

"Only might?"

"Yes—an' there's lots of mites in a pound of cheese." He laughed boisterously but uneasily.

"What did she say, exactly?" he asked.

I began to repeat, as well as I could, the phrases of the letter:

"*Mon cher Alfred,—Figure-toi comme je suis désolée*——"

He listened with some confusion. When I had finished all I could remember, he said:

"They know how to pitch you out a letter, those Belgian lasses."

"Practice," said I.

"They get plenty," he said.

There was a pause.

"Oh well," he said. "I've never got that letter, anyhow."

The wind blew fine and keen, in the sunshine, across the snow. I blew my nose and prepared to depart.

"And *she* doesn't know anything?" he continued, jerking his head up the hill in the direction of Tible.

"She knows nothing but what I've said—that is, if she really burnt the letter."

"I believe she burnt it," he said, "for spite. She's a little devil, she is. But I shall have it out with her." His jaw was stubborn and sullen. Then suddenly he turned to me with a new note.

"Why?" he said. "Why didn't you wring that b—— peacock's neck—that b—— Joey?"

"Why?" I said. "What for?"

"I hate the brute," he said. "I let fly at him the night I got back——"

I laughed. He stood and mused.

"Poor little Elise," he murmured.

"Was she small—petite?" I asked. He jerked up his head.

"No," he said. "Rather tall."

"Taller than your wife, I suppose."

Again he looked into my eyes. And then once more he went into a loud burst of laughter that made the still, snow-deserted valley clap again.

"God, it's a knockout!" he said, thoroughly amused. Then he stood at ease, one foot out, his hands in his breeches pocket, in front of him, his head thrown back, a handsome figure of a man.

"But I'll do that blasted Joey in——" he mused.

I ran down the hill, shouting also with laughter.

. . . . .

M. Lesueur laid down the manuscript with a sniff of perplexity. Perhaps the second bundle would be more rewarding.

"The Priest's Tale," he read. And then its title:

PÈRE ETIENNE

THE PRIEST'S TALE

PÈRE ETIENNE

By ROBERT KEABLE

PÈRE ETIENNE came aboard at Dar-es-Salaam and did not at once make friends. It was our own fault, however. He neither obtruded nor effaced himself, but rather went quietly on his own way with that recollection which the clerical system of the Catholic Church encourages. We few first-class passengers had already settled down into the usual regularities of shipboard life, from the morning constitutional in pyjamas on the boat deck, to the Bridge four after dinner in the smoke-room, and, besides, it was plain that Père Etienne was not likely to have much in common with any of us. So we were polite at a distance, like Englishmen everywhere. Even I, who, by virtue of my cloth, might have been supposed to make advances, was shy of beginning. I was young in those days, and for one thing spelt Rome always with a big capital.

But from the first there was something which attracted me to the priest, the more so as it was hard to define. In his appearance there was nothing

to suggest interest. His age was round about fifty; his hair brown, though in his beard a white hair or two was to be observed. In his short black coat and trousers he looked neither mediæval nor a traveller, and his luggage was neither romantically minute nor interestingly large. He was booked from Dar-es-Salaam to Bombay, and the purser professed neither to know whence he came nor whither he went beyond those two fixed points.

Yet I was attracted. I have no wish to bore you, so that I shall not dwell upon the point, but in my opinion it was interesting. There are some people who carry an atmosphere with them as they go their own individual way about the world, and there are others who can instantly perceive it. I am not speaking of clairvoyance; I dislike that jargon; but I do know that I was conscious of Père Etienne if he did but pass the smoke-room door when I was about to play a doubled four in No Trumps.

Well, our old British India tramp lay about for a week in Dar-es-Salaam harbour, rolled up to Tanga, and finally crossed over to Zanzibar, without further developments. There we passengers went sweltering about the narrow streets, visited duly the coconut and clove plantations, and conceived ourselves to be exploring by hiring a car, crossing the island to Chuaka, and spending a day up the creek. Père Etienne went at once to the Catholic Mission and remained there. Thus it was not until the evening on which we sailed that we saw him again.

It was half an hour or so before sunset, and a

serene beauty lay over land and sea. There was the gentlest breeze, and at our moorings it was almost cool. We were clustering on the landward side of the ship, smoking and watching the town and harbour. Close up under the tall white houses the blue sea broke in tiny creamy ripples on the sand or the low coral rocks, and, with its green woods to right and left, the city seemed to dream in the sun. One could see, however, that it was preparing to wake. A flutter of orange or scarlet on the flat roofs here and there told that the women were already coming up to enjoy the cooler hours; and between the thin cassuarinas in the square that opened to the sea before the Sultan's Palace, a white-robed crowd was gathering for the faint excitement of the sunset gun. Between ship and shore, the brown-timbered rough-hewn native boats came and went on their long oars, and in smarter skiffs the silk and curio merchants were taking a lingering leave of us. From the south a dozen peaceful lateen-sailed dhows beat up for the native anchorage behind which, from our view-point, the twin spires of the Catholic cathedral stood out against an opal sky. Despite travellers' tales, there is only one mosque with a minaret in Zanzibar, and that so small and hidden that it is scarcely visible from the sea.

Watching the dhows and sighting the cathedral, suggested, I suppose, Père Etienne. Someone asked if his reverence had come aboard, but no one knew. Lazily turning the question and answer over in my mind, I became aware that I was sure he had. The persistent intuition grew

on me. Without speaking of it, I determined, out of sheer curiosity, to go and see. I detached myself from the group unobtrusively, and strolled off round the deck.

Sure enough on the seaward side I saw him. He was sitting in a deck-chair and looking out across the water. At first I thought he was gazing intently at nothing, but as I too looked, I made out, across the strait, the dim outline of the Shamballa Mountains on the mainland that are sometimes visible for a little at sunset and dawn. The priest's chair was drawn close to the bulwark, and almost before I knew what I was doing, I was leaning against it in an attitude which allowed me, too, to see those distant peaks and at the same time to converse easily, if it should be permitted.

"Hullo, father," I said; "we were wondering if you had come aboard."

He looked at me, smiling. "I believe I was one of the first," he replied, in his excellent English.

"Saying good-bye to Africa?" I queried, half jocularly.

"Yes, I expect so."

The tone of his voice suggested far more than the words themselves expressed. It aroused my curiosity. "For long?" I asked.

"Well, I don't suppose I shall see those peaks again. I saw them first twenty-seven years ago, a young priest on his first mission, and I have not seen them from the sea since. Now I have been ordered to India to my second mission, and it is not very likely that I shall be moved again. It is still less likely that I shall return. After so

long an acquaintance, it is natural that I should want to say good-bye."

I think I was slightly incredulous. "Do you mean you have been over twenty-seven years up there without leave?" I questioned.

"Twenty-seven next month, there and beyond."

I have told you that I was young in those days, and I did not then know of the heroic sacrifices of Catholic missionaries. Moreover, I too was taking a first leave—after two years' service, according to our plan. And I was eagerly looking forward to a visit to my married sister in India, and a journey home after that. Stupidly enough, it took me a few seconds to swallow those twenty-seven years; but for all that my mind worked quickly. Twenty-seven years of tinned food, mosquitoes, heat, natives, and packing-case furniture! That was how I read it. "Well," I said at last, "I should think you were glad to go anywhere after all that time."

"Eh? Oh, I don't know. No, that's wrong; I do know. I'm sorry, that's the truth."

"You like Africa?"

The Frenchman showed himself in the half-humorous shrug of the shoulders, but the missionary spoke. "It has become my home, and its people my people," he said.

I turned the saying over in my mind before I spoke again. Then interest and attraction overcame my hesitation, and I abandoned all pretence of making a chance conversation. "Father," I said, "I expect you have travelled a good deal up

there and seen many things. Tell me a little about it all. I've seen enough to be very interested in your experiences. May I pull up a chair and may we talk?"

His brown eyes twinkled. "Certainly," he said, "especially if you will give me a fill of that English tobacco you're smoking. Years ago I learned to smoke English tobacco, but it hasn't too often come my way."

I threw him my pouch with a laugh and went to find a chair. That was the beginning of many conversations, but none of his stories interested me more than the one he told me that night. He had half hinted of strange happenings away back there in remote districts, as well as of more commonplace although sufficiently interesting journeys and adventures, and it was to the less usual that I was drawn that evening. There was that about Père Etienne which made one feel that the commonplace world was of secondary importance, and that he, like the poet at Charing Cross, might find Jacob's ladder reaching heavenward in any place. Thus, while the light died swiftly out of the sky and the stars shone out over that far-off range which runs up to the Para Mountains and giant Kilimanjaro and that far-flung plain which lies embraced beyond, between them and the great lakes, I put my question and he answered it. "Tell me the queerest of all the queer things you have seen, father," I said.

"Queer?"

"Yes," said I. "Unusual, I mean. Not necessarily supernatural, and not horrible. But

the thing, perhaps, that more than all else draws your mind back to Africa."

"You ask a big thing," he said, smiling friendlily.

"And I believe you can answer it," said I, impulsively.

He nodded more gravely. "I believe I can," he said.

"I shall tell you a little story that seems to me singularly arresting and tender. True, I believe that it may arrest me because it occurred in a village —or perhaps I should say a town—which I have visited but once though I have often tried to get back to it again. Now I shall never go. Very likely it is for that reason, then, that it lingers in my memory as a place of great beauty, though in my opinion there are other causes. However, let me begin by describing it to you.

"From the slopes of Kilimanjaro you can look westwards to Mweru, a still active volcano little known and rarely visited, and from Mweru a chain of heights runs west once more till they end abruptly almost in a precipice that descends to the plain. At its foot rises a small river, bubbling up from half a dozen springs in a slight depression, and flowing swiftly off, very clear and cool, towards the great lake which is visible on the horizon from the mountain behind. Just below the pool of the source, on the right bank, shaded with trees, ringed with giant aloes and set in fields of millet and maize, stands a somewhat remarkable native town. There is stone in the hills, and the natives have drawn and worked it for their huts—not a

usual thing in tropical Africa. They may, of course, have learned the lore themselves, or some wandering Arab traders may have taught them; but I have another idea, as you shall hear. Be that as it may, there the neat houses stand—grey walls, brown thatch, small swept yards of trodden earth before them within the rings of neat reed fencing. Great willows grow along the bank and trail their hanging tendrils in the water, and the brown kiddies swing from them and go splashing into the stream with shouts of delight. The place is remote, and in a corner out of the path of marauding tribes. Not too easy to find, its folk are peaceable, and I can see it again as I saw it on my first visit when, from the height of the precipice behind, I could make out the thin spires of smoke rising on the evening air and just perceive the brown herds of cattle drifting slowly homewards to the protecting kraals.

"The tribe is a branch of the Bonde, iron workers and a settled folk. How they came to be there, so far north and west of the main stock of their people, I do not know, but of course one comes across that kind of thing fairly commonly and the explanation is nearly always the same. Fear of some kind drove out a family who wandered, like Abram from Charron, until they found a promised land. These folk knew that they came from the south and east a long long time ago; more they neither knew nor cared to know. They were not many in number, and although Arab *safaris* had passed by, they were not enough to tempt a permanent trader to cross the barren lands north and

south, or dare the mountain way from Mweru. The chief's oldest councillor spoke to me of a slave-raid that had been defeated when he was a young man, but since then they had dwelt in peace. No European had been there within living memory.

"Such was, and may be still, the town of Mtakatifuni, as I shall call it. Do you know Ki-Swahili?"

I shook my head.

"Then the name will do, and not spoil my tale. Let me but tell you how I came to be there and I will make haste about it. I was exploring. Ah, but once in all the years have I been able to explore! Usually we missionaries hurry from place to place on an unending round till the circle is as big as we can possibly manage. Then a new centre must be made, and it was because my Order had determined on a new centre that my opportunity came. The Vicar Apostolic was doubtful as to the direction in which we should expand. He sent me, therefore, west beyond Mweru to see what could be seen, and another farther south on the same errand. The folk were few about Mweru, but I heard a rumour of Mtakatifuni, much exaggerated, and set out to find it. Foolishly I went west until supplies were so low that it would have been fatal to turn back over the bare mountains by which we had come, and our only hope lay in pushing on. And so I reached my hidden town, stayed a while, and returned another way, to find that the other explorer had a report to make of more peopled and easier lands which

found greater favour with his lordship. And rightly. When labourers are so few and the field is so big, it is necessary to settle where the work offers most prospect of large returns. So was I permitted to see, but not to enter in."

He leant forward to knock out his pipe, blew down it, refused more tobacco, and re-settled himself. "Ah, well," he said philosophically, "*le Bon Dieu* knows best. I do not believe He has forgotten Mtakatifuni.

"Where was I? Oh yes, I remember. We saw the place then, in the evening, and next morning journeyed early towards it. You must understand that we were spent. I cannot recall better water than that at the source of that little river, and the roasted mealies they gave us, and sour milk, how good it all was! The chief had sent word that we were to be fed and given an empty house, and after I had eaten I went to see and thank him. I put on my cassock and with it my beads about my waist, and I carried my breviary in my hand, for I thought he might keep me waiting in the native fashion and that I could say my office in the meantime.

"But he received me at once. The ground rose a little and was built up too before his group of huts, terraced roughly and faced with stone, with steps at one end. A big block of stone stood near the edge of it, so that standing behind one looked east over the town to the mountains, and it was there, after a little, that I offered the Holy Sacrifice each remaining day of my stay. There was little linen in the place, and he stood to greet me at the

top of the steps, clad in prepared skins, a youngish man and a fine figure of a savage king. He gave me later the twisted iron spear of state that he carried that day. It hangs in our church of the Holy Cross now, behind the altar of the Sacred Heart. Surely the Good God will not forget Mtakatifuni.

"Well, he greeted me courteously, with reserve, but with a suggestion of curious eagerness. I marked it at once. Not, however, till the usual questions as to my journeys and so on were over, did I get a clue to the cause of it. But then, when we were seated on stools by the great stone I have mentioned, big clay beakers of thin, delicious light beer beside us, he put a question. 'Why have you been so long a time coming, my father?' he asked. 'A little later and you would have been too late.'

"I was slightly puzzled, but I supposed he referred to the length of my journey. 'The way was long and rough, chief,' said I.

"'But why were you so long in setting out?' he persisted. 'Mwezi has been expecting you for many years.' He turned to an old councillor. 'How many years has Mwezi been expecting the father?'

"'Since the days of the Great One, the father of the King,' said the old man. 'Mwezi came first among us when I was a boy.'

"Now most of this was Greek to me, but the speaker was fifty if he was a day, whatever allowance was to be made for the early ageing of Africans, and you may imagine that I understood enough to

be surprised. 'How could that be, chief?' I asked. 'When this old man was a boy, I had not crossed the black water to come to this land, and possibly I had not been born. Truly of this Mwezi I knew nothing, but how could he expect me whom even my mother had not seen?'

"The chief looked worried, and stared at me for awhile in silence. Then he nodded thoughtfully. 'It is true,' he said. 'The father is doubtless wise and has seen years, but his beard is not white and the thing is strange. Nevertheless he wears the black robe and the dried beans, and he carries the book in his hand, even as Mwezi has said. Still, I have sent for Mwezi, and doubtless he will explain the matter. See, he comes; slowly, for he is very old. Does the father not remember him at all?'

"He pointed down the path that led up to us from the town, into which had come a small crowd of natives who were eagerly following three or four figures, jostling each other to get a better view. It soon became plain that a young man led the way, and that after him came three of whom I guessed the central person to be Mwezi. I think he was the oldest native I have ever seen, bent, shrivelled, and stiff-jointed, but with keen dark eyes which, a little later, fixed themselves inquiringly on my face and then clouded with acute disappointment. On either side his sons helped him with a hand beneath his arm-pits, and he himself walked by means of a great stick. The crowd of hangers-on stopped respectfully below, but these four climbed up to the dais. A stool

was brought for the old man, but at first he would not sit. He stood there, staring at me and shaking his head. 'It is not he,' he said, 'it is not he. Yet he is like, very like. But it is not he.'

"I was still perplexed at all this, but by this time a little amused. Nevertheless I hid that, for the old fellow was so plainly disappointed.

"'Come, father,' I said. 'I am very sorry, but will you not explain? Perhaps it is a brother of mine whom you have seen. Seat yourself and tell me about it.'

"He did not seem at once to comprehend, but when his sons had persuaded him to sit, he made a peremptory motion with his stick towards the old councillor who had spoken before. This individual glanced at the chief for permission, and having received it, told me this story at considerable length.

"He said that, very many years before, in the time of the late king, the village had been one day thrown into a state of great excitement by the advent of a stranger. This had been Mwezi, at the time a man of middle age. He had come from the south and west—from Central Africa, that is—and he had said that he was seeking a white man whom it had been shown him he should find in that village. Pressed for details, he announced that he had come from a town far away by a wide river where there were great falls over whose rocks the water thundered night and day in a perpetual cloud of spray. One night he had awakened in his hut, and had seen a white man standing before him dressed in a black robe, a string of beads, and carrying a book. Behind the white man he could see, as

it were, the vision of a town, a river, a precipice—in short, what he now saw to have been Mtakatifuni. The figure had beckoned him solemnly, and he had sat up in his bed in fear. It had beckoned again, and had then pointed north and east, and at that the vision had died away before the startled sleeper's eyes. But Mwezi understood. In his mind there had been no question as to what he must do. In the dawn he had risen, said good-bye to his wife and family, and set out. For two years he had journeyed, wandering from place to place, scarcely knowing whither he went save that it was always north and east. The very wild beasts had respected him, and men, seeing the vision in his eyes, had withheld their hands from him. At length, then, he had reached Mtakatifuni. There, as always, he had inquired for his white man, and, hearing that no white man had ever been there but convinced that it was the place of his dream, he sat down to wait. He had grown old waiting; had married, and had begotten sons and daughters. Now he was too old to move; all but too old to live; but still he waited. Still he believed he would see his white man again before he died; indeed, he could not die until he had seen. My coming had seemed to the whole place the fulfilment of his vision, but I was not the man. Mwezi was sure of that and no one doubted him. And maybe, now, added the councillor, he would never see him. That was all.

"Now I had been long enough in Africa to set little store by native dreams as a rule. The affair, then, seemed to me pathetic rather than interesting.

My eyes kept straying to the old fellow while the story was being told me, and I marvelled to think of the simplicity of his faith, the weariness of his journey into the unknown, and the tenacity with which he had clung to his obsession. That this man should have given his whole life to such a quest, and should now be so bitterly disappointed when a remote chance had brought it nearer realisation than had been in the least degree likely, was indeed certainly cruel. I therefore turned to him to make what amends I could.

"'But, old Mwezi,' I said as kindly as possible. 'doubtless you are mistaken. It was but once that you saw the figure in your dream, and that years ago. You dreamt of a white man dressed as I. Well, I belong to a regiment of white men who dress alike, and for many lives it has been the custom of that regiment to dress so. Doubtless as a boy you had seen one of my brethren, or perchance a picture of one, and your spirit saw him again in a dream. If I am right, and your home is on that great river which we white men call the Zambesi, then it is not unlikely that such a thing happened. Perhaps you have forgotten. Now in me you see him whom you seek.'

"The old fellow's keen eyes flashed angrily. 'The white stranger mocks me,' he said.

"I protested. 'No, father, I do not mean to mock you. Why should I do so? But come now, can you describe the face of the man you saw?'

"'I can, and easily. His beard was white and not as thine. Moreover, he was bald-headed, and beneath his right eye was there a little scar such as

he had perhaps received in the hunt from some beast or the other. His face was long and thin, and his nose bigger. Am I a child that I should not know one man from another? Thou art not he.'

"It was foolish of me, but I was surprised out of all caution. 'How could you see so much in the dark of your hut?' I exclaimed.

"Mwezi rose to his feet and made a pathetic effort to hold his head erect. With true native dignity, he ignored me and turned to the chief. 'With the leave of the chief, I go,' he said. 'I am old and would rest in my place. Fare thee well, father of thy people. The Heavens guard thee. Be in peace.'

"I realised that I had blundered, but at the moment there was nothing to do. We watched the procession move away again almost in silence, and I noticed curiously that the crowd were even more interested in Mwezi than in myself, a white stranger. When he was out of sight, I apologised to the chief, who, however, would not hear that I had done any wrong. He himself showed me back to the house set apart for us and invited me to feast with him in the evening. He gave me leave to speak to his people, and I remember that I was so dog-tired that I lay down at once and slept for the rest of the day.

"In the morning, however, I remembered Mwezi, and told the chief that I would like to go and call on him. I determined to do what I could for the old fellow's peace of mind, and, with a guide and one of my own boys, we set out.

"The way led through the native huts and with-

out them. It was downhill going, as the village, in African fashion, was built on the side of a rise which culminated in the chief's hut, while Mwezi lived very close to the source of the river I have mentioned. We emerged through trees into a grassy open space of perhaps thirty paces wide, and I saw at once the old fellow sitting at the door of his hut beneath the shade of a wild vine which grew luxuriantly over the porch and roof. I was too much occupied in greeting him to take note at once of the building, but when we were seated, and he had been thawed out of his first coolness, I looked more closely at it. It interested me. It was long in shape, much longer than the usual native hut, and with three windows narrow and pointed, one of them now roughly blocked with sods. I examined the stones of the walls, getting up to do so. They struck me as being old and much more carefully laid than is usual in native work.

"'Did you build this house yourself, old man?' I asked. 'It is well made.'

"'I did not build it,' he said. 'I found it here. When I came to Mtakatifuni, it was empty and had been empty for long. There was no roof to it in those days, and few came near the place. But that suited me. My mind was full of him whom I had seen, and my spirit told me that I should await him here. The father of the chief then gave it me, no councillor knowing aught about it.'

"'And you planted this vine and cleared this space, perhaps?'

"'I did not. I did but train the vine which had blocked the door, and cut down for the wood of the roof the young trees that had grown here. But some other had cleared the ground before me.'

"'Would you mind if I looked within, Mwezi?' I questioned, for to tell you the truth my curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"The old fellow got up courteously. 'Enter, white man,' said he. 'My sons shall bring the stools and fetch us beer. I am old and poor, but you are welcome. You are at least of the people of him I saw, and shall I, in my sorrow, forbid you to come in?'

"We entered. The place was divided into two by a sod partition, plainly recent in construction, and I looked disappointedly at what I could see. There were the usual scant furnishings of a native hut—a *kitanda*, some pots, a stool or two, a few spears in a corner. But when I passed round the partition, my interest increased tenfold. I even cried out in my astonishment.

"I saw what I had not been able to see from the fact of my approach from the west of the clearing. The eastern end of the hut was not built squarely as the other, but roughly rounded in what elsewhere I should unhesitatingly have called an apse, and since on either side there were still visible a couple of those narrow pointed windows, while the floor space was practically empty, the suggestion of a chapel was complete. I ought, perhaps, to have guessed it before, but the thought burst on me suddenly. The situation, near the stream rather than up on the hill, the orientation,

the unusual length, the vine, the clearing—everything pointed in the same direction. And then the old man's story. I was frankly amazed.

" I turned and saw him standing in the doorway, his hand on the mud wall for support, his eyes peering at me from his bowed head. If I had been momentarily suspicious of a knowledge hitherto kept from me, all fled at the sight of him. He was transparently honest and eager. ' What is it, white man ? ' he quavered.

" ' Mwezi,' said I, ' here is a strange thing and a wonder. You tell me that you saw in your vision a white man, and I know from what you say that he was a priest. You travelled far, and your spirit sent you here. Well, I do not doubt that this house of yours was once a place of worship, and I think it was built by white priests. Think now, have you heard of no such thing ? '

" He swayed a little as he stood, and did not answer at once. Then he slowly shook his head. ' I have heard nothing, nothing,' he said. ' If it be so, none know of these things, white man. Art thou sure ? Thou wouldst not mock me again.'

" ' Mwezi,' I cried eagerly, ' I do not mock you. Why should I do any such thing ? I cannot yet tell certainly, but this place is such as we build for prayers, and we may yet make sure. May I search more diligently ? '

" ' Do what thou wilt, my son,' said he, ' and if my hands cannot, my spirit will help thee.'

" There and then I began a close scrutiny. I went outside, measured, tapped, sought, but I

found nothing more. If there had ever been a stoup, a cross, a rude piscina, they had long since gone. But the more I searched, the more sure grew my conviction that the place had been a chapel. At last I sat down to rest, and while resting, I had an idea.

" ' Mwezi,' I said, ' have you ever dug up the floor ? '

" He shook his head. ' Why should I dig it up ? ' he asked.

" ' Would you allow me to do so ? ' I queried.

" He looked doubtful. ' But why ? ' he asked again, suspiciously. ' And would you dig even now ? '

" I laughed. ' Well, not at once,' I said. ' We must find a new house for you first. But if I am right, it may be that things are buried here, or that there are stones which will tell me a tale. See, the floor is higher now than it was. There was a step here at the door, and the mud has nearly covered it.'

" ' It is but the smearing,' he said, half contemptuously.

" That roused me. Of course I know the native habit of cleaning a house by putting down a fresh layer of mud mixed with a little dung, which in time raises the floor considerably. But I was not to be put off by that. Below the smearing of the old man's time might be a layer of earth thrown in to hide something. I glanced round. ' May I borrow a spear ? ' I asked.

" He nodded, and I selected one from the corner with a long thin blade. Then I went into the

inner room, and he came and stood again to watch me with his peering old eyes. Under his scrutiny, I began in the apse and thrust downward as far as I could. The blade sank to its hilt fairly easily, and that was all.

" Thus I stabbed until I came to the string of the apse, and then, almost at once, I made a discovery. The point of the blade struck a stone. A foot to the left, it touched again, and a foot more. In a few minutes I was all but certain that a stone slab was buried there. You may imagine my excitement.

" Mwezi called his sons and sent one for a native hoe. When he returned, we all gathered about the place while he slowly dug up the trampled mud. In a few minutes a stone slab was being exposed to view, and with my spear I got to work scraping off the earth while he dug free the other end. Suddenly, as I scraped, I made out a cross, and to cut the story short, we laid bare at length what had undoubtedly been an altar-stone. Every one of the five crosses were plainly visible, and left no room for question.

" We stopped out of breath, and I explained something of its use. At that Mwezi spoke suddenly, calling our attention to him. ' Lift it, lift it,' he cried. ' Lift it at once.'

" The old man was a striking spectacle. His withered face was simply alive with emotion. He was kneeling on hands and knees, and his thin fingers worked at the edge of the slab. Something in his voice compelled us, and we got at once to work. After all it was an easy task, for it was soon

apparent that the stone was fitted into brick, with which the whole place was paved, and with spade and spear we levered it up a little. Then two of Mwezi's sons got their fingers under it, and without any great effort raised it completely. They staggered aside with it and the rest of us peered within. For a second we looked, and then Mwezi gave a great cry.

" ' My father, my father ! Lo, I have come to thee, as thou didst bid. These many years have I waited, for my spirit spoke true, bidding me rest above thee. Now will I pass on whither thou art passed, and as thou hadst understanding, so it shall befall. Lo, I come to thee, seeking peace ! '

" His voice hesitated, and failed, and he fell forward very gently and slowly till his head rested on his hands on the edge of the tomb. None of us dared to move for a few seconds, for Mwezi's voice rang so truly and convincingly. Great awe fell on us all, for he had spoken as one who certainly saw. Then I stretched out my hand and touched him, but he had gone, as he said. And on his face was peace.

" That is all there is to tell in a way. For inside the grave, if grave it were, there was nothing at all that it was given to our eyes to see—not a bone, not a shred of a habit, nor book nor beads. If ever a body or treasures of any sort had been there, the receptacle had been rifled long before, and entirely forgotten. So there is literally no more to tell. Of course the affair made great excitement. The chief and all his people came to see, and came once again the day after when I

lowered Mwezi into the grave and replaced the altar stone. After that the door and the windows were blocked up at my request, against the day of the coming of the Faith once more to Mtakatifuni. For that, the space about the sanctuary is to be kept clear of undergrowth, by order of the chief. For that old Mwezi waits beneath the altar, and maybe he whom he saw waits also."

The dinner bugle had sounded a few moments before Père Etienne had finished, and now we rose to go. We stood a second, and I gazed over the side at the star-shine on the water, for the night was fine. When I looked up, Père Etienne was staring out into the darkness, a far-away look on his face, but he must have felt my eyes on him, for he turned quickly and smiled. Possibly he read a question I rather wanted to ask, but did not dare. Anyway, he smiled, as I say, and shook his head. "I have lived too long in Africa to have theories, my friend," he said, "but to me the memory of Mwezi and his chapel is a very precious thing. We are all of us souls on pilgrimage, and we rarely understand why or how, or remember that we have a Guide. But I like to think in the end, the Good God willing, we shall find a hidden sanctuary and that we have been led to a place prepared."

. . . . .

M. Lesueur threw down the second of the three translations with an exclamation of annoyance.

Suppose the third were no better? Suppose he had been wasting his time on the lucubrations of literary English tourists? Alas! One of the drawbacks to his profession was the impossibility of short-cuts to knowledge. One never knew. He must read the third story, even though it leave him as unenlightened as its predecessors. Grimly and with an effort toward concentration he took up the final translation, the original of which read as follows:

THE TALE OF MR. PETER BROWN CHELSEA JUSTICE

THE TALE OF
MR. PETER BROWN

CHELSEA JUSTICE

By V. SACKVILLE WEST

THE first thing which attracted my attention to the man was the shock of white hair above the lean young face. But for this, I should not have looked twice at him: long, spare, and stooping, a shabby figure, he crouched over a cup of coffee in a corner of the dingy restaurant, at fretful enmity with the world; typical, I should have said, of the furtive London nondescript. But that white hair startled me; it gleamed out, unnaturally cleanly in those not overclean surroundings, and although I had propped my book up against the water-bottle at my own table, where I sat over my solitary dinner, I found my eyes straying from the printed page to the human face which gave the promise of greater interest. Before very long he became conscious of my glances, and returned them when he thought I was not observing him. Inevitably, however, the moment came when our eyes met. We both looked away as though taken in fault, but when, having finished his coffee and laid out

the coppers in payment on his table, he rose to make his way out between the tables, he let his gaze dwell on me as he passed ; let it dwell on me quite perceptibly, quite definitely, with an air of curious speculation, a hesitation, almost an appeal, and I thought he was about to speak, but instead of that he crushed his hat, an old black wide-awake, down over his strange white hair, and hurrying resolutely on towards the swing-doors of the restaurant, he passed out and was lost in the London night.

I was uncomfortably haunted, after that evening, by a sense of guilt. I was quite certain, with unjustifiable certainty born of instinct, that the man had wanted to speak to me, and that the smallest rsponse on my part would have encouraged him to do so. Why hadn't I given the response ? A smile would have sufficed ; a smile wasn't much to demand by one human being of another. I thought it very pitiable that the conventions of our social system should persuade one to withhold so small a thing from a fellow-creature who, perhaps, stood in need of it. That smile, which I might have given, but had withheld, became for me a sort of symbol. I grew superstitious about it ; built up around it all kinds of extravagant ideas ; pictured to myself the splash of a body into the river ; and then, recovering my sense of proportion, told myself that one really couldn't go about London smiling at people. Yet I didn't get the man's face out of my head. It was not only the white hair that had made an impression on my mind, but the unhappy eyes,

the timidly beseeching look. The man was lonely, I was quite sure of that; utterly lonely. And I had refused a smile.

I don't know whether to say with more pride than shame, or more shame than pride, that I went back to the restaurant a week later. I had been kept late at my work, and there were few diners; but he was there, sitting at the same table, hunched up as before over a cup of coffee. Did the man live on coffee? He was thin enough, in all conscience, rather like a long, sallow bird, with a snowy crest. And he had no occupation, no book to read; nothing better to do than to bend his long curves over the little table and to stab at the sugar in his coffee with his spoon. He glanced up when I came in, casually, at the small stir I made; then by his suddenly startled look I saw that he had recognised me. I didn't nod to him, but I returned his look so steadily that it amounted to a greeting. You know those moments, when understanding flickers between people? Well, that was one of those moments.

I sat down at a table, placing myself so that I should face him, and very ostentatiously I took a newspaper out of my pocket, unfolded it, and began to read. But through my reading I was aware of him, and I knew that he was aware of me. At the same time I couldn't help being touched by what I knew I should read in his face: the same hostility towards the world at large, and towards myself the same appeal, half fearful, half beseeching. It was as though he said, aloud and distinctly, "Let me talk! For God's sake let me

talk it out!" And this time I was determined that he should; yes, I was quite grim over my determination. I was going to get at the secret that lay behind those hunted eyes.

I was in a queer mood myself; rather a cruel mood, although the starting-point of my intention had been kind. I knew that my mood had something of cruelty in it, because I discovered that I was purposely dawdling over my dinner, in order to keep the man longer than necessary on the rack. Queer, the complexities one unearths in oneself. But probably if I had been an ordinary straightforward kind of fellow, I should never have had the sensibility to recognise in the first instance that the man wanted to talk to me. It's the reverse of the medal, I suppose.

He had finished his coffee, of course, long before I had finished my dinner; he had squeezed the last drop out of the little coffee-pot, and I wondered with amusement whether he would have the moral courage to remain where he was now that his ostensible pretext was gone and that the waiter was beginning to loiter round his table as a hint that he ought to go. Poor devil, I could see that he was growing uneasy; he shuffled his feet, and the glances he threw at me became yet more furtive and reproachful. Still I gave no sign; I don't know what spirit of sarcasm and teasing possessed me. He stood it for some time, then he shoved back his chair, reached for his hat, and stood up. It was a sort of defiance that he was throwing at me, an ultimatum that I should either end my cat-and-mouse game, or

let him go. As he was about to pass my table on the way out, I spoke to him.

"Care for a look at the evening paper?"

Absurd—isn't it?—that one should have to cloak one's interest in a stranger's soul under such a convention as the offer of a paper. Why couldn't I have said to him straight out, "Look here, what's the matter with you?" But our affairs are not so conducted. He accepted my offer, and stood awkwardly reading the *City News*, which I thought a sure indication of his confusion, as by no stretch of fancy could I imagine him the possessor of stocks or shares. "Sit down," I said, "while you read."

He sat down, with a mumble of thanks, laying his old black wideawake beside him on my table. I think he was glad of the paper, for it gave him something to do with his hands and his eyes. I observed him, and he must have known I was observing him. Underneath the thick, snow-white hair the face was young, although so sunken and so sallow, the face of a man of perhaps twenty-seven or eight, sensitive, not at all the face of a criminal escaping from justice, in spite of that hunted look which had been so vividly present to me during the past week. An artist, I thought; perhaps a writer; a romantic face; not blatantly romantic; no, but after you had delved into the eyes and traced the quiver of the mouth you discovered the certain signs of the romantic idealist.

"I saw you here last week," he muttered suddenly.

The little restaurant was by now almost empty; many of the lights had been turned down, and at most of the tables the chairs had been tipped forward. Being privileged as an old and regular customer, I beckoned to the proprietor, and in a whisper begged that I might not be disturbed, as I had to hold a business conversation of some importance with my companion. At the same time I poured out for the stranger a glass of wine from my own bottle, remarking that the wine here was better than their coffee. This seemed to unloose his tongue a little, for he exclaimed that coffee was very bad for the nerves, especially strong, black coffee, as he drank it; and after this short outburst relapsed again into silence, taking refuge in the paper.

I tried him once more.

"I don't remember seeing you here before last week?"

He shot me a quick look, and said, "I haven't been in London."

"Travelling, perhaps?" I hazarded negligently.

He gave a harsh shout of laughter, succeeded by the same abrupt silence. Would all our conversation, I wondered, be conducted on this spasmodic system? He certainly didn't second my efforts at small-talk. Was what he had to say too vital, too oppressive?

"I say," I resumed, leaning forward, "have I seen you anywhere else? I think your face is familiar. . . ." It was a lie; I knew perfectly well that I had never seen him anywhere; his was not an appearance to be lightly forgotten.

"And yet," I added, as he stared at me without speaking, "I am sure I should remember; one would remember this contrast"—and I touched first my face and then my hair.

"It has only been like that for a fortnight."

He brought out the words, scowling and lowering at me, and then the fierce look died away, to be replaced by a look of apology and pain; a cowed look, like that of a dog who has been ill-treated. "That is what made you notice me," he exclaimed; "it brands me, doesn't it? Yes. A freak. One might as well be piebald." He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, and, taking a handful of his hair, he tugged at it in a rage of despair; then sinking his face between his hands, he sat shaking his head mournfully from side to side.

"Listen," I said, "have you any friends?"

He raised his head.

"I had a few stray acquaintances. Nothing would tempt me to go near them now."

"Anyone to talk to?"

"Not a soul. I haven't spoken to a soul since—since I came back."

"Fire ahead, then," I said, "talk to me. You don't know my name, I don't know yours. You're quite safe. Say whatever you like. Go on. I'm waiting."

He began, talking in a voice low, rapid, and restrained. He spoke so fluently that I knew he must often have rehearsed the phrases over to himself, muttering them, against the day when he should be granted expression. "I had two friends.

They were very good to me. I was homeless, and they told me to look on their home as my own. I hope I didn't trespass too much on their hospitality, but I fell into the habit of wandering into their house every evening after dinner, and staying there till it was time to go to bed. I really don't know which I cared for most, in those early days, the man or the woman. It had been with him that I first made acquaintance; we were both engaged on journalistic work, reporting, you know, on different papers—and we came across each other once or twice in that way. He was a saturnine, queer-tempered fellow, taciturn at times, and at other times possessed by a wry sense of humour which made him excellent company, though it kept one in a state of alert disquiet. He would say things with that particular twist to them which made one look up, startled, wondering whether his remark was really intended to be facetious or obscurely sinister. Thanks to this ambiguity he had gained quite a reputation in Fleet Street. You can imagine, therefore, that I was flattered when he singled me out; I listened to all his remarks with a respect I was too proud to betray; although I adopted an off-hand manner towards him, I didn't lose many opportunities of letting the other fellows know, in a casual way, that I had been practically given the run of his house; and I was never sorry to be seen when we strolled off with his arm in mine.

"They lived, he and his wife, in a tiny house at the end of Cheyne Walk. On misty evenings we used to sit, all three, on the sill of the bow-

window, watching the big barges float by, while our legs swung dangling from the high sill, and we talked of many things in the desultory way born of easy intimacy, and I used silently to marvel at the sharpness of his mind and the gentleness of hers. She was very gentle. It even irritated me, faintly, to observe her complete submission to him. Not that he bullied her, not exactly. But he had a way of taking submission for granted, and so, I suppose, most people accorded it to him. It irritated me to see how his wife had subdued her personality to his, she who was of so tender and delicate a fibre, and who more than anyone wanted cherishing, instead of being ridden down, in that debonair, rough-shod way of his, that, although often exasperating, still had something attractive about it. She and I used to discuss it sometimes, in the evenings, when he was kept out late at his job—it's an uncertain business, reporting—we used to discuss it with the tolerance of fond people, and smile over his weaknesses, and say that he was incorrigible. All the same, it continued to irritate me. Sometimes I could see that he hurt her, when in his impatient way he swung round to devastate her opinions with those sly and unanswerable phrases that placed everything once and for always in a ridiculous light. What a devilish gift he had, that man, of humiliating one! And he did it always in so smiling and friendly a fashion that one could neither take offence nor retaliate. In fact, one didn't realise that one had been attacked until one felt the blood running warm from one's wounds, while

he had already danced away upon some other quest.

"I can hardly trace the steps by which my admiration of him grew to affection, my affection to uneasiness, and my uneasiness to resentment. I only know that I took to flushing scarlet when I saw her wince, and to making about him, when I was alone with her, remarks that were less and less tolerant and more and more critical. My temper grew readier to bite out at him, my amusement less easily beguiled. I don't know whether he noticed it. Most probably he did, for he always noticed everything. If he did, then he gave no sign. His friendliness towards me continued unvarying, and there were times when I thought he really bestirred himself to impress me, to seduce me, he who was usually so contemptuous, and seemed to enjoy stirring up people's dislike. It wasn't difficult for him to impress me, if that was what he wanted, for he had, of course, a far better brain than my own; the sort of brain that compelled one's startled admiration, even when one least wanted to accord it. By Jove, how well he used to talk, on those evenings, when we sat and dangled our legs from the window-sill, looking out at the barges! The best talk I ever heard. You could have taken it all down in shorthand, and not a word to alter.

"Then he got a regular job which kept him out for three evenings a week, but he told me that mustn't make any difference to my habits: I was to drop in just the same, whenever I wanted to; and since I hadn't anywhere else to go, and since

the house had become a home to me, I took him at his word. In a way I missed him, on the evenings he wasn't there; although I could no longer pretend to myself that I was fond of him, he was a perpetual interest and stimulation to me, an angry stimulation, if you can understand what I mean, and I missed his presence, if only because it deprived me of the occupation of picking holes in him, and of making mental pounces for my own satisfaction upon everything he said. Not upon its intellectual value. That was above reproach. Only upon it as a signpost to his character. I took a delight in silently finding fault with him. But presently this desire passed from me, and I came to prefer the repose of the evenings I spent alone with his wife to the strenuousness of the evenings when we were all three together. We talked very little, his wife and I, when he was not there. She had about her an amazing quality of restfulness, of which I quickly got into the habit of taking advantage, after the vulgar, competitive days of a journalist's existence. You can't imagine what it meant to me, to drift into the seclusion of that little Chelsea room, with the mistiness of the trees and the river outside the window, to be greeted by her smile, and to sink into my familiar arm-chair, where I might lounge sucking at my pipe and watching the cool glimmer of her beautiful hands over the rhythm of her needle. Can you wonder that we didn't talk much? And can you wonder that our silence became heavy with the things we hadn't said?

"Not at first. Our love-affair ran a course contrary to the usual ordering of such things. If it indeed ended in all the fever and pain of passion, it certainly began with all the calm of the hearth; yes, I went through a long phase of accepting that room as my home, and that gentle woman as my natural companion therein. I don't think I examined the situation at all closely at that time. I was more than content to let so pleasant an acquiescence take possession of me; for the first time in my life, you understand, I was neither lonely nor unhappy. The only thing that jarred was *his* presence. The evenings when *he* was there were all out of tune. All out of tune."

The man with the white hair paused to pour himself out another glass of wine; and his voice, losing the dreamy note of reminiscence, sharpened to a more rapid utterance—a crescendo for which I had been waiting.

"I haven't an attractive character," he resumed; "I don't want you to think that I have, and so accord me more sympathy than I deserve. Please be quite impartial. Please realise that, according to ordinary standards, I played the part of a cad. Think: there was a man, ostensibly my friend, who had given me the run of his house; I accept his hospitality and his friendship, and then take advantage of his absences to make love to his wife. Not a pretty story, although a commonplace one. Please be quite harsh towards me, and let me be quite harsh towards myself. I did none of the things I ought to have done under the circumstances; I neither went quietly abroad without

making a fuss, nor did I attempt to conceal my feelings from her. If you knew her," he said, with an anguish of longing that lit up the whole story for me better than any words of his could have done, " if you knew her, you would realise at once that she wasn't a woman from whom one could conceal one's feelings. There was that calm gentleness about her which made all hypocrisy a shame and a sham. Also, deceiving her would have been like deceiving a child ; hurting her was like hurting a child. (That was what enraged me when *he* hurt her, and I had to stand by, and listen.) She was so simple, and direct, and defenceless. So, you see, as soon as I realised what had happened, I told her. It wasn't a dramatic avowal, and it had no very immediately dramatic consequences. In fact, for a while its only effect was to bring me across the room from my habitual arm-chair, to sit on the floor near her with my head against her knee ; and so we would remain for hours, not moving, scarcely speaking, for there was such harmony and such content between us that we seemed to know everything that passed in each other's minds.

" Of course, that couldn't last. We were young and human, you see ; and standing in the background, overshadowing the perfection of our solitary hours, was his long, sarcastic figure—her husband and my friend. An impossible situation, when you come to consider it. The evenings that he spent at home very soon became intolerable, from every point of view. I grew so nervous with the strain of keeping a hold on myself, that

even her tenderness could no longer soothe me. He didn't seem to notice anything amiss, and, you know, the funny, horrible, contradictory part was that, much as I now hated him, I was still conscious of his charm. And so, I think, was she. Can't you picture the trio in that little Chelsea room, while the barges floated by, and she and I sat on opposite sides of the fireplace, so terribly aware of one another, and *he* lay on the sofa, his long legs trailing over the end, discoursing in his admirable and varied way on life, politics, and letters? I wonder in how many London drawing-rooms that situation was being simultaneously reproduced?

"Why do I bore you with a recital so commonplace?" he exclaimed, bringing his fist down on the table; "are you beginning to ask yourself that? What have you to do with journalistic adulteries? Only wait: you shan't complain that the sequel is commonplace, and perhaps, one day, when you read in the papers the sequel to the sequel, you will remember and be entertained. He caught us red-handed, you see. It was one evening when we hadn't expected him home until after midnight, and at ten o'clock the door opened and he stood suddenly in the room. Squalid enough, isn't it? To this day I don't know whether he had laid a trap for us, or whether he was as surprised as we were. He stood there stock still, and I sprang up and stood too, and we glared across at one another. After a moment he said, 'Paolo and Francesca? this scene acquires quite a classic dignity, doesn't it, from frequent repeti-

tion?' And then he said the most astonishing thing; he said, 'Don't let me disturb you, and above all remember that *I don't mind*,' and with that he went out of the room and shut the door.

"After that," said the man with the white hair, "I didn't go near the house for a week. This was at her request, and of course I couldn't refuse her. During that week she telephoned to me daily, once in the morning and once in the evening, always with the same story: she had seen nothing of him. He had not even been home to collect any of his clothes. You may imagine the state of anxiety I lived in during that week, which his disappearance did nothing to palliate, but rather heightened by leaving everything so mysterious and uncertain. She was evidently terrified—I could hear it in her voice—but implored me to keep away, for her sake, if not for mine. At the end of the week he appeared without warning in the office of the paper where I worked, and, greeting me without making any allusion to what had happened, invited me to come for two days' sailing in a small boat which had been lent him by a friend.

"I was startled enough by this incongruous suggestion, but naturally I accepted: you couldn't refuse such an invitation from a man who, you suspected, intended to have such a matter out with you on the open sea. We started immediately, and all the way down in the train for Cornwall he talked in his usual manner, undeterred by the fact that I never answered him. We got out at Penzance, the time then being, I suppose, about six o'clock

in the evening. I had never been to Penzance before, but he seemed to know his way about, walking me briskly down to the harbour, where a fishing-smack under the charge of a rough-looking sailor was waiting for him. By now I was quite certain that he meant to have it out with me, and for my part, after the long uncertainty of the week, I asked nothing better than to get to grips with him. All I prayed for was a hand-to-hand struggle in which I might have the luck to tip him overboard, so I was rather dismayed when I saw that the sailor was to accompany us.

"We started without any delay, getting clear of the port just as the darkness fell and the first stars came out in a pale green sky. I had never been with him anywhere but in London, and it crossed my mind that it was odd to be with him so far away, off this rocky coast, in the solitude of waters; and I looked at the green sky above the red-brown sails of the fishing-smack, and thought of the barges floating down the river at Chelsea. They were ships, and this was a ship; they carried men, and this one also carried men. I looked at my companion, who sat in the stern holding the tiller. There was a breeze, which drove us along at quite a smart pace. 'Cornwall,' I said to myself, staring slowly round the bay and at the black mass of St. Michael's Mount, 'Cornwall . . .'

"I don't know how many hours we sailed that night, but I know that when the day broke we were out of sight of land. All that while we had not spoken a word, though to all practical purposes

we were alone, the sailor having gone to sleep for'ard on a heap of nets, in the bottom of the boat. He was a rough, handsome, foreign-looking fellow, of a type I believe often to be found in that part of England. I couldn't understand the object of this sailing expedition at all. It seemed to me an unnecessarily elaborate introduction to the discussion of a subject which could as well have been thrashed out in London. Still, as the other man was the aggrieved party, I supposed that he was entitled to the choice of weapons; I supposed that his devilish sense of humour was at the bottom of all this, and I was determined not to give him the chance of saying I wouldn't play up. But why couldn't he tell me what was in his mind? How far did he mean to take me out to sea first? These questions and others raced through my mind during the whole of that night, while I sat back leaning against the sides of the boat, watching the stars pass overhead and listening to the gentle sip, sip of the water.

"At dawn my companion rose, and, shading his eyes with one hand while with the other he still held the tiller, he stood up scanning the surface of the waters. I watched him, resolved that it would not be me who spoke first. After a while he appeared to find what he was looking for, for he said, 'Nearly there.' I could see nothing to break the whole pale opal stretch of sunrise-flushing sea but a small black speck which I took to be a buoy, and the faint echo of its bell was borne to me through the clear air. He sat down again beside the tiller, and we sailed on in

the same silence, into the loveliness of the morning. I was quite certain that he had some sinister purpose, though what it was I could not yet imagine. What did he mean by that 'Nearly there'? Although he did not actually stir, he gave me the impression of concentration now, and at a word from him the sailor awoke and shot a rapid glance at me, as though doubtful whether he would find me still in the boat. I was beginning to wonder whether I should be a match for the two of them, when my companion, leaving the tiller, made a step towards me with a handkerchief he had drawn from his pocket; the sailor pinioned my arms from behind, and no sooner had I recognised the peculiar smell of chloroform than I was insensible and inert between them.

"It was very neatly done. I might have trusted him to carry out neatly whatever he undertook. Even over that he compelled my angry admiration. So neat! the fiend, the devil, he had got the better of me before I had had the chance to put up even the feeblest struggle. I curse myself now for my silly bravado in accompanying him when he asked me. I might have known I wasn't a match for him. But I'll be even with him yet," he said, his nervous hands fumbling at his collar, "I'll be even with him yet; I'll bide my time," and never was vindictiveness more savage in human eyes.

"He didn't allow me to come to my senses until he had carried out his purpose. When I opened my eyes I was *inside* the cage of the buoy, with the bell swinging gently to and fro above my head.

Have you ever seen one of those buoys? They consist of a pear-shaped iron cage fixed on to a sort of platform, like the keel of a dinghy, and the bell hangs betwen four clappers at the top of the cage, and as the thing rocks up and down on the swell of the sea the clappers hit against the bell. There was just room for me to sit on the platform, crouched up inside the cage. One section of the cage was hinged to open, and the door thus formed was secured by a padlock; how he had got the key of it Heaven alone knows. I have tried to convey to you—haven't I?—that he was a very able and successful fellow.

"When I came to, he was circling slowly round and round the buoy in his sailing-boat, lounging indifferently beside the tiller, and watching me with an expression of mockery I can't reproduce in words. I lost my head then; I leapt up and shook the bars of my cage and screamed to him to let me out. I can hear now in my ears the futility of my own voice screaming across the placid emptiness of the water. I must have looked like a trapped ape—the kind of ape that is most like a man. I shook the iron bars so violently that the whole of my floating prison jumped about, and the bell began to ring loudly. He only lounged and smiled. No doubt he had looked forward extremely to the moment. His amused impassivity was the thing best calculated to restore my self-control, and I try to salve my vanity by thinking that I should never so have gratified him but for the bewildering effects of the anæsthetic. I calmed myself down, I tried to reason with him,

I exhorted him to settle up his wrongs in a more civilised manner. Then, seeing that every plea was to him a source of fresh delight, I ceased to argue, and became silent, holding on to the bars of my cage and watching him as he cruised slowly round and round the buoy. Presently he talked to me. They were like neat incisions in my flesh, his words. Oh, he spared me nothing, I assure you; there wasn't a phrase without a beautifully tempered edge to it. I recalled his words when he had caught us together, 'Don't let me disturb you, and above all remember that *I don't mind*,' and even in the midst of my rage and hatred I couldn't help respecting him for that irony.

"I learnt now the full extent to which he had minded. Quite coldly he told me. He had spent the week wondering whether it should be himself or me that should be put out of the way. So much had he minded, you see. I think he had been hurt in his pride, even more than in his affection for . . . for her. I hadn't suspected that he was so sensitive over what he considered his honour—dense of me, perhaps—but there was no mistaking that this sensitiveness now tied the extra lash on to the whip of his tongue. When he had finished talking, when he had said all that he wanted to say, and all without once losing his temper or his damned insolent dexterity, he nodded to me for all the world as though we had been talking shop in Fleet Street, and were separating to go about our various businesses. That nod remains with me; I'll never forget it or for-

give it; it seemed to me the last crowning insult; it seemed to sum up all that I most hated in the man.

"He put his boat about, she heeled over a little as the breeze took her, and that slight slant of her sail was pencilled against the pale sky as she glided away across the water. I can't resist the journalistic touch, you see," he added, with an outburst of extraordinary bitterness.

"It was not until his boat had dwindled to a tiny black dot far away that I began fully to realise the situation. There was I, alone in the middle of a great circle of sea and sky, alone and confined, and ludicrously helpless. At first it was upon the ludicrous aspect that I chiefly dwelt, the anger of it, the absurdity, and the humiliation. Then little by little the horror of it crept over me, and I was aghast; there was, of course, the gleam of hope that I might attract the attention of a passing ship, but the Channel at that point must be fairly on the way to becoming the Atlantic, and I dared not delude myself too boldly lest I be disappointed. He wasn't coming back for me; he had made that quite clear. He had left beside me on the bottom of the buoy a parcel of food and a bottle of water, enough, he had said, to keep me for a week if I used it sparingly. He had said, with a grin, that I would be all right for a week if the weather kept calm. If not, he was afraid I might be inconvenienced. But he would like me to have a week, because that was exactly the length of time that he had had. Those had been his last words before he nodded and said, 'So long.'

" The whole of that day passed in a dead calm. I sat on the floor with my arms clasped round my knees, because there wasn't room to stretch out my legs, and when I became too cramped in that position I stood up, which I could just manage to do if I stooped my head. Later on I found out that I could stand upright by putting my head inside the bell, but I couldn't bear that for very long because of the intolerable noise of the clappers hitting the bell so near my ears. I tried holding the clappers still, but that was no good, as there were four of them. So I held the bell itself, which at least deadened the sound. No, I couldn't unhook the clappers; they were a fixture. Anyhow, that first day I wasn't much troubled by the noise of the bell, as the buoy rocked very slightly on an oily swell; I was more troubled by the dazzle of the sun on the water, not daring to shut my eyes for long lest I should miss a possible ship, and also I was divided between the gnawing of my thoughts and the boredom of those interminable hours from sunrise to sunset. I don't suppose it is given to many men to have nothing better to do than watch the sun travel across the heavens from the moment it emerges above one horizon to the moment it dips below the rim of the other. That was what I watched—the delicacy of dawn, the blood-red of sunset, and the grand golden sweep of the journey in between the two.

" Never had I felt so abandoned or so insignificant. Can your imagination enter into it at all? To do so, you must keep the sense of the enormous circle of sea always present in your mind,

the hard round edge of the horizon, and the buoy in the centre like a speck of dust in the centre of a plate. I felt I was in a tiny prison in the middle of an enormous prison. And after the sun had gone it was worse; it is true that I could no longer see that huge hard circle, but I knew that, although invisible, it was still there, and now in addition I had a black vault over me, and it grew cold, and a loneliness closed down on me such as I had not experienced while I had the sun and his warmth for companions. I dared not contemplate the prospect of many such days and nights; I simply dared not let myself think. I tried to sleep, but was too cold. A breeze sprang up at about midnight, and the buoy rocked more noticeably; again, I dared not picture my discomfort should the weather change. I called it discomfort; I didn't know then, I hadn't yet begun to learn.

"Two days passed like that. Two whole days. Have you ever tried to spend two days, or even one day, or even twelve hours, doing absolutely and literally nothing? If not, try it, especially if you happen to be an active man. I could only sit there, my knees drawn up and my hands either clasped round my knees or hanging between them. I was confronted all the time by the thought of what the end was to be. Starvation and death from thirst? I could see very little other prospect. For the first day I had been comparatively sanguine that a ship would come along, but hourly this hope dwindled, till there was no real hope left, but only the old obscure and unreasoning human obstinacy. So on the second day I suffered

from my thoughts; I hadn't, as yet, undergone any real physical suffering.

"The morning of the third day broke with dark clouds over a grey sea. It was indescribably dreary. All that water, all that mass of grey water! I huddled my knees up against my chest for warmth. A shower fell, and I minded that because it meant more water, not only because it chilled me; don't think I exaggerate: the quantity and the monotony of so much water was getting on my nerves. They were in a pretty bad state by then, so bad that the dread of ultimate madness had already crossed my mind. I was weakened, too, by insufficient food, for I knew I must economise my resources. Once or twice steamers passed, a very long way off. I shouted till my throat was hoarse, but quite in vain. Each time they passed out of sight, I sobbed. Forgive me.

"The wind held, driving the masses of low clouds across the sky, and chopping the sea into little waves, white-topped amongst the grey, which tumbled and tossed the buoy till I was sickened and wearied. I fancied that the pulp of my brain was being shaken to and fro inside my head; it felt like that. I prayed for the wind to go down, but it only gained in strength. I felt I should go mad; I was so impotent, you see. And the bell clanged above my head—I was condemned to unceasing movement and unceasing noise."

He stared round him with tormented eyes, as though afraid that the whole restaurant would begin rocking and vibrating.

"And there were other things, ridiculous and humiliating," he resumed, "that robbed me even of the small consolation of tragedy. How can I tell you? I shall lose all dignity in your eyes—if indeed I ever had any to lose—as I lost it in my own. The terrible sickness, you understand. . . . That, and the din of the bell, and being flung up and down, backwards and forwards. No rest, not for a moment. I prayed, I tried to fight my way out of the buoy, between the bars, to throw myself into the sea. The sea was rising visibly, and the spray of the waves broke over me, drenching me; the salt dried upon my face, stiffening my skin. There were moments when I thought I could endure the rest, if I might have a respite from the movement; other moments, if I might have a respite from the sickness; and yet others, if I might have a respite from the clang of the bell. In the intervals of the sickness, with such strength as remained to me, I tore strips from my soaking shirt and tried to bind up the clappers; it muffled the noise a little, but not much. I wept from weariness and despair.

"It pursues me," he said, again putting his head between his hands and shaking it with the same tired mournfulness; "at nights I think that my bed is flung up and down, and when I spring out the room reels round me as though I were drunk. There was no escape. It was no use trying to bend the bars of the cage, or to pull up the planks of the bottom. And the sickness, the sickness! It tore me, it shattered me, but never for a moment did I lose consciousness of the

supreme humiliation it brought on me, and I supposed that he had foreseen this; surely he had foreseen every detail. Secure in London, by now, he was surely rubbing his hands together as he thought of the derelict ceaselessly tossing up and down at sea." He gave a kind of snarl. "I pictured him, as no doubt he was picturing me.

"The real storm came next day, and I had to cling to the bars of the cage with both hands to save myself from being flung from side to side and broken against the iron. There were periods, I think, when I fainted from exhaustion, emerging incredibly bruised, and instantly in the grip of the sickness again. The buoy was hurled about, down into the grey valleys between the waves, drenched over and over with masses of water, as though some giant were flinging down enormous pailfuls; indeed, it remains a mystery to me why I wasn't drowned. No doubt I would have been if the light platform hadn't floated like a cork. The bell was ringing wildly all the time. Every time I went down with the buoy I saw the sky tilting impossibly over my head, and the wave curling up above me before it smashed and fell, burying me beneath it."

He became silent, and sat for a long while heavily brooding to himself. Once or twice he closed his eyes, as though his thoughts were causing him intolerable pain. I knew that he was living again through all that racket and nightmare. I didn't say anything; the thunder of the storm roared too loudly in my head for me to upraise my small voice against it, or to offer my

tiny sympathy to that man whose endurance had been measured against the elements, and whose standard must be for ever after raised to the summit of their standard.

He let fall one or two phrases that seemed to open a rift down into the mirk of his experience, so that I thought I looked for a moment into the very night that he described :

" I had simply given up hope. I was so weak, you understand. By the time that night came I was just letting myself be thrown about, anyhow, quite limp, my head rolling and my arms flacking ; I must have looked like a man in a fit. Whenever I opened my eyes I saw the moon between the clouds rushing furiously down the sky, and rushing back the other way as another wave took me up again on its crest. The light of the moon was just sufficient to light up the rough and tumble of the inky hills of water. I remember thinking quite stupidly to myself that the moon was a dead world, and that I envied her for being dead. All this happened to me," he said, frowning across the table with sudden intentness, " the week before last."

This mention of human time brought me back with a shock from the fantastic world to which he had transported me.

" Hallo ! " I said, starting as one awakened, and making in my confusion a ridiculous remark, " it must be getting very late."

Only the ceiling light burnt in the little restaurant, which but for ourselves was deserted. The stranger leant over towards me, and a shiver

passed over me at the nearness of this man whom I did not know, and to whose extraordinary experience I had, so to speak, by my own doing, been made a party. I wanted to put an end to it now, I wanted to say, "Yes, I have been very much interested. Thank you very much for telling me," and then to get up and go away. But at my first movement he detained me.

"Listen a little longer. I'm not mad, you know, and you needn't be afraid that I shall ever bother you afterwards. You don't know what good this has done me. I've been alone with this thing for a fortnight, nearly, thinking about it. The storm. . . . It lasted for two days; that made four days since I had been on the buoy. I think another day of storm would have killed me. There wasn't much life left in me by the time the sea began to go down. Two days of storm. . . ."

His voice trailed away. I think he felt, as I did, that the moment was over when he had really held all my attention and all my imagination. It was no good trying to revive it. I was tired, as though I had lived through some brief but violent mental stress.

"Two days of storm," he muttered vaguely.

"And how did you get away?" I asked; it was a perfunctory question.

"How did I get away.—Oh.—Yes, of course. A ship, on the seventh day. Yes, there were three days of calm after the storm; comparative calm, but for the swell. So I had the week he had intended for me to have, to the full. The ship's carpenter came alongside in a dinghy, and filed

through one of the bars. I never told them how I came to be there. I said it was for a bet, and that I was to have been fetched by my friends the next day. When I got on board I collapsed. I'd just come out of hospital the day you first saw me here." He rose wearily. "Well, I mustn't keep you. Thank you more than I can say, for having listened."

It seemed strange that *he* should be thanking *me*.

We walked towards the door of the restaurant together; outside, the London street was empty under a melancholy drizzle of rain.

"You had better give me your name and your address," I said, pricked on to it by a curiously conventional conscience.

"No, no," he said, backing away from me. "You've been kind, you mustn't ever be implicated."

"Why, what are you going to do?" I cried.

He turned, his old wideawake crammed down over his hair, and his face half buried in the upturned collar of his coat, but I saw the sudden gleam of his eyes by the light of a street lamp.

"Think out something worse to do to him," he mumbled rapidly; "something worse to do to *him*."

. . . . .

As he read the last words M. Lesueur's brow darkened. A mare's nest indeed! An hour gone and nothing gained! Then his eye caught a footnote to the last page of the translation he had just perused.

" About the middle of this story " (the footnote said) " I found a few words in brackets that seem to have no connection with the tale. They are in French—foreigner's French and faulty—but they appear to mean : ' We are imprisoned in the garret under the leads of the long wing of the château. Our food will last only another day.' " This laconic footnote was initialled " H. F. (translator)."

The Commissary's eye brightened. Here at last was something, and something good. Rapidly he made his plans. He would start in twenty minutes with six men ; he would advise Toussaint by telephone to meet him at the château with six more. The case would prove, perhaps, vastly important. He saw decorations and Paris employment ; he read in imagination columns of praise in the great papers of the capital. Quitting unwillingly the realm of ambitious fancy, he took up the telephone, but before he could speak there came a sharp knock at the door, and a gendarme stood awaiting permission to address his superior.

" What is it ? " demanded M. Lesueur.

" A tramp, sir," replied the gendarme.

" God in heaven, man ! What do I care for a tramp ? Is this a workhouse ? Send him away and go after him ! "

" He has found two Englishmen in a dungeon," observed the gendarme with wooden persistence.

" Let him join them ! " snapped M. Lesueur, angrily. Then the next moment, " What do you say ? Englishmen ? Where ? What dungeon ? "

" He asks leave to make his deposition, sir. He is not an ordinary tramp."

For a moment the commissary hesitated. The memory of those words interpolated in the third of the mysterious stories checked his impatience. Never neglect possible information.

"Bring him in," he said shortly, and replaced the telephone receiver that, all this while and to the intense irritation of the exchange, he had held vaguely in his hand.

There was ushered in a lean, scarecrow figure at whose heels (despite scuffling protests from the gendarme without) limped a black, untidy dog. The tramp bowed and began at once to speak in the slow correct French of a well-educated foreigner. He told of a dusty road along which he had toiled; of a coppice and its tempting shade; of the drowsiness of afternoon; of dream voices that were not, after all, of dream; of a mound with a mysterious grating; of a subterranean cavern and its two unusual and impatient prisoners. M. Lesueur listened in silence. The story done, he took up the telephone once again. While waiting for his connection, he addressed the senior gendarme of those present in the room.

"I want the two fastest cars brought round immediately. This fellow shall take us to his mound and we will see how far he is lying and how far telling us the truth. We will then proceed to the Château de la Hourmerie. Six men will be required to accompany me. Make your selection——'allô! 'allô!—— Toussaint?—— Is that you, Toussaint?"

And he outlined with curt efficiency the instructions laid down for his subordinate.

" In an hour," he concluded, " we meet at the Château de la Hourmerie. One hour, mind you ! One hour from now." Smartly and with finality he hung up the receiver.

The Commissary was already struggling into his dust coat when there came yet a second interruption. The sound of many agitated feet in the outer office prepared the occupants of M. Lesueur's private room for threatened but not for actual invasion of their retired sanctuary. Wherefore they regarded with speechless amazement the tempestuous entry of two elegantly gowned women, one clutching the other firmly by the arm, while in close and uncomfortable attendance followed two men, one tall, white-whiskered, and conspicuous in a buff alpaca suit, the other short, stout, and shining with the sweat-drops of embarrassment.

The female invaders lost no time in stating their business, but as they both spoke at once and shrilly, the unfortunate Commissary learnt little of the matter at issue between them. Not until the united efforts of all the men present had silenced feminine vociferation was it possible to understand what in the world the pother was about. The old gentleman, to whom in courtesy priority of speech was accorded, made the following statement :

" About an hour and a half ago I entered the Casino in company with the young lady whom now you observe in the grip of—er—the other lady. My companion, whose name is Amélie, was anxious at once to join the crowd at the tables.

We contrived to edge ourselves to a convenient front seat, and for some while played quietly and with varying success. I then observed that new-comers were seeking to force a way to the front row of players, and, in order to give others their turn, stepped behind my companion, leaving vacant the spot I had previously occupied. It was filled forthwith by the second of the two ladies now before you, who thanked me with a charming smile for my courtesy, and was on the point of turning her interest wholly to the game when her eyes fell on Amélie. Instantly she flushed with excitement, paled again and flushed once more, and I was the next moment aware of a rapid movement of her arm as she snatched from the neck of Amélie an ornament that hung there from a thin gold chain.

"You can imagine the excited confusion that ensued, the outcome of which is my attendance here to account, so far as I may, for the disturbance in which I have been involved."

M. Lesueur acknowledged the straightforward simplicity of the old gentleman's story with a slight bow.

"Your name, sir?" he asked.

"Withershaw. I am an Englishman."

"Did you know any of these persons before this afternoon?"

"Yes and no. Yes—because the lady who assaulted Amélie in the Casino turns out to be the widow of a relative of mine, and her name, although not her person, is quite familiar to me. No—because my acquaintance with Mdlle

Amélie predated by an hour only our visit to the Casino. This gentleman I have never seen before."

The Commissary suddenly recalled his waiting motor-cars, his telephoned appointment, his sensational prospects at the Château de la Hourmerie. Between him and the door of his room was an excited and perspiring crowd, not the least awesome members of which were the two angry ladies. By ill-luck his second in command was ill and away from work. Next in seniority came an official, competent enough to deal with ordinary cases of theft, disturbance, or general misdemeanour, but hardly to be trusted with an affair deserving of delicate and cautious management. M. Lesueur felt obscurely that the present was an affair of that kind. The parties to it were not only well dressed, but (with the possible exception of Amélie, whose social complacency the evidence of Mr. Withershaw appeared to have established) suggestive of good breeding, or at least of normal good behaviour. It would not do, thanks to the inexperience of a subordinate, to involve the Commissariat of St. Hilaire in unpleasantness with foreigners of influence and distinction.

With a sigh of impatience M. Lesueur turned again to his chair and sat down. He gave an order to the gendarme at his elbow:

"Telephone Toussaint that I am delayed, that I will be at La Hourmerie half an hour later than I said. Perhaps forty minutes. The cars can wait."

He spoke in a low voice, but not so low that the quick ear of Amélie did not catch the words "La

Hourmerie." She compressed her lips, cast a look of spiteful triumph at her antagonist (who still held her arm as in a vice), and awaited developments in vengeful silence.

"Now!" said the Commissary briskly. "Your names, please. M. Withershaw—prénom? Thank you. M. *James* Withershaw. Yours, madame? Pardon? Spell it, please."

"D-A-N-E—trait d'union—V-E-R-E-K-E-R," said the captor lady, with precision and a very passable accent.

"Amélie Vildrac."

"Hector Turpin."

A clerk made the necessary entries. Mrs. Dane-Vereker was asked to give her version of the afternoon's events.

"They are few and easy to relate," she said. "This woman was my maid. Two days ago she stole, among other things, a valuable and valued cameo belonging to me, and disappeared. This afternoon, and by the merest hazard, I found myself next to her at the tables. With an effrontery natural to women of her type she was wearing the very ornament she had stolen. Naturally I charged her with the theft, and attempted to seize my property. That is all I have to say."

"And you, Mdlle Vildrac?"

Amélie shrugged insolent shoulders.

"Things have an air so different from different points of view," she observed. "Madame tells her story. I tell mine. Which will you believe? Here are the real facts. It is true, as Madame has said, that until two days ago I was Madame's maid.

It is also true in effect that two days ago I left her. But not clandestinely, oh no! nor with stolen valuables. Rather at her bidding, and with a small trinket that she gave to me at parting. 'Amélie,' she said to me, 'I have planned to leave these people we are with'—you must understand, Monsieur, that Madame and I were members of a touring party under the charge of M. Hector Turpin yonder. Mon Dieu, how strange some of that party! English, all of them, and so strange!—— But I was saying that Madame had planned to leave them. 'I am going away with M. Turpin,' she said to me, 'and these stupid people must extricate themselves as best they may from the trap into which my clever Turpin has led them. You will not betray me? Go you to Paris or to St. Hilaire and seek your fortune. Here is money and here is the cameo you have so often admired. Wear it in memory of me, and for its sake keep silence.' Voila!" Mdlle Amélie spread out emphatic hands. "Am I a thief? Is it theft to take gifts from another woman? And finally, M. le Commissaire, seeing that you are bound for La Hourmerie, I ask you to observe that this precious elopement took place from that very spot, and that in the Château de la Hourmerie were staying those other unfortunates, now abandoned to their fate by the selfish passion of Madame for her cicerone turned paramour!"

It may be imagined that Amélie's scandalous declaration let loose Babel once again in the office of the unhappy Commissary. Mrs. Dane-Vereker, Turpin, Amélie, and Mr. Withershaw voci-

ferated simultaneously and with prolonged fervour. The patience of M. Lesueur came finally to an end.

"Silence!" he roared, banging the desk in frenzy. And then to the attendant gendarmes, who, by now, numbered some twelve highly edified stalwarts, he shouted an order for the instant incarceration of these pestilent folk. Their fate should be decided on the morrow.

"As for you, Mademoiselle," he said to Amélie, "I know your type well, and I ask you to note that I am indeed bound for La Hourmerie. I shall not forget your story. Between this moment and to-morrow you will have time to think of the various embellishments of which it is susceptible."

And he hurried from the room toward the outer door, followed by six gendarmes, and, between two of them, the tramp, while from the office they had left came a confused turmoil of bitter feminine insult, of French official determination, of furious Anglo-Saxon protest. Baba, the black dog, bundled in his master's wake.

II

On the terrace of the Château de la Hourmerie clustered a motley and excited group. In the centre M. Lesueur, his face alight with the satisfaction of a quest worthily fulfilled, gazed almost fondly at the body of rescuers and rescued that bore witness to his triumph. First was the tramp, impassive as ever, his whole bearing a slouch of

uninterested fatigue. By his side—unshaven, a little dusty, but otherwise no whit the worse—stood the Professor and the Bureaucrat, salved from their underground prison by the crowbars of the six muscular policemen who formed at the present impressive juncture a stolid back-drop to the scene. Close by, also unshaven and weary-looking, but happy in the moment of release, were a priest, a poet, and a nondescript young man of amiable aspect and engaging mien, whose name was Peter Brown. M. Lesueur had just completed his narrative of events at the Commissariat of Police.

"Good Lord!" said the Bureaucrat. "Fancy Mrs. Dane bolting with old Turps!"

"I shall never write another story on wall-paper," remarked Peter Brown. "It's worse than marking handkerchiefs. But we could make no one hear, and thought, if we hurled out of the window a bundle of paper with a message hidden somewhere in the middle of apparently harmless text, there was just a chance of its being picked up. The lane runs fairly near to yonder corner of the house. You can imagine how thrilled we were when the old envelope—weighted with Father Anthony's pocket knife and my pipe stop—fell plump into a passing cart."

"The chance was indeed providential," commented the Priest gravely, "but let us not forget that we owe to our zealous and sharp-eyed friends among the police the actual discovery of our queer message hidden in the grass of the cross-roads."

"Where are the others of the party?" broke in the Bureaucrat. "We know that Turpin and Mrs. Dane and that minx Amélie are in jail. But where are Miss Pogson and Doctor Pennock and Mr. Scott, and where's old what's-his-name, the Master Printer? . . ."

END OF PART III

PART IV.—AS YOU WERE

THE reply was unexpected. Somewhere at the back of the château a clock struck noisily. In their basket chairs on the terrace of the Château de la Hourmerie the members of Mr. Hector Turpin's first Continental touring party sat spellbound at the force of a chime hitherto unnoticed. They had counted twelve strokes. To their horrified amazement, the chime rang out once more—and they realised that the tall windows of the house no longer threw comforting light upon the flagstones, that behind them, as before, lay utter darkness.

Seven voices spoke as one :

" Did you hear it ? The clock struck thirteen ! "

And again :

" Did you see, the way the lights went out ? "

For a moment there was profound silence. Then from the last chair of the line came a long-drawn, chuckling laugh, a laugh of pride, of amusement, of relief.

" Well, upon my word ! " said in quiet, incisive tones the voice of Henry Scott (of the Psychical Research Society). " I hardly dared to hope for so complete a triumph ! My good friends, it is one a.m. As the clock struck twelve you sank

into hypnotic trance; on the point of its striking one, you emerged. The hour of interval was telescoped in your waking consciousness to a few seconds. As for the lights—at half-past twelve Doctor Pennock went to bed. She turned them out as she passed through the house. I asked her to. I will relight them now."

And he walked to the nearest window, crossed the room within and switched on every lamp.

The bemused wits of the victims of Mr. Scott's hypnotic joke could not immediately respond to this sudden revelation of the truth. Also their eyes blinked in the new brilliance of projected light. Mrs. Dane-Vereker was the first to recover speech.

"But where is that wretch Amélie?" she gasped.

"And the Commissary?" demanded Father Anthony.

"And the Old Gentleman?" echoed the Courier.

"Turpin, by the lord Harry!" shouted the Bureaucrat. "But you've eloped with Mrs. Dane!"

"The guile of an enemy detained me in a damp and poorly ventilated cave," complained the Professor.

"There was a tramp here with a dog!" moaned the poet.

"The terrace was crowded with police!" cried Peter Brown, "and it was still daylight! . . ."

Mr. Scott enjoyed their bewilderment with the cruel calm of the true psychological investigator.

"You will never see any of those people again," he observed quietly. "Except poor Amélie, who

is in bed this three hours, I invented them all. Not a bad set of creations, were they?"

A snore from the shadow drew attention to the stertorous oblivion of Mr. Buck, the retired master printer.

"Buck was my only failure," said the psychical researcher. "He was fast asleep when I started in. I say nothing of Doctor Pennock; she was too much for me; but then she knows the game. Nevertheless, she had the sportsmanship to leave me at it."

By this time signs of considerable indignation were visible among the dupes of Mr. Scott's inventive skill. The Lady of Fashion recalled with blushing fury her supposed escapade with the absurd Courier. The Bureaucrat re-lived his angry helplessness behind the iron grille. Before, however, anger could break out, the tension gave way to the irrepressible humour of Peter Brown. Suddenly he began to laugh, and each moment he laughed more loudly and more shamelessly. One by one the others joined, until by the healthy wind of merriment every trailing wisp of irritation was dispelled and blown away. Mr. Scott rose to his feet.

"You are admirable folk," he said, "the whole collection of you! I am proud to be associated with so unselfish and humorous an assembly. Let me make some slight amends for my impertinence. In the first place, I would ask your pardon for subjecting you without warning or permission to a most interesting experiment. In the second place, let me tell you a tale against myself, a tale

that shows me in the light of a bewildered, blundering fool. I had never, until the complete success of the unwarrantable trick I have just played upon you excellent people, really recovered from the depression of this adventure. It will discipline my vanity to tell the story, for I can hardly think of it without nervousness. Surely, by the time it has been made verbally public, I shall be chastened as befits simple humanity."

THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE

THE SCEPTICAL POLTERGEIST

By J. D. BERESFORD

THERE was once a time (he began) when I decided that I was a fraud; that I could not be a psychical researcher any longer. I determined to give it all up, to investigate no more phenomena nor attend another séance, nor read a word about psychical research for the remainder of my life. On the contrary, I planned an intensive study of the works of the later Victorians, of that blissful period in the history of Europe when we could believe in the comforting doctrine of materialism. "Oh!" I thought, "that one had a Haeckel or a Huxley living now to console us with their beautiful faith in the mortality of the soul!" The Neo-Darwinians failed to convince me; the works of H. G. Wells left me cold.

I will tell you the events that brought me to this evil pass.

It is not likely that anyone here will remember

the Slipperton case. It attracted little attention at the time. In 1905 there was still a little sanity left in the world. A few even of the London dailies were nearly sane then, and refused to report ghost stories unless they were known to be untrue. And the Slipperton case had hardly any publicity —an inch in the *Daily Mail*, headed "Family Evicted by Ghosts," was the only newspaper report that I saw; though there may have been others. In these days the story would be given a couple of columns opposite the leader page; and the Sunday papers . . .

I was connected with the thing because Edgar Slipperton and his wife were friends of mine; quiet, old-fashioned people who believed that when you were dead you *were* dead, and that that was the end of it.

The phenomena that drove them out of their house at last were of the ordinary poltergeist type that date back to the days of John Wesley. The Slippertons had a fat and very stupid cook, whom I suspected of being an unconscious medium; but they were so attached to her that they refused to give her notice, as I strongly advised them to do. They told me that although she was constitutionally unable to grasp a new idea, such as the idea of a different pudding, she was entirely dependable, always doing the same things in the same way and with the same results. And while this confirmed my suspicions that she was a spiritualistic medium, I recognised that she might have useful qualities as a cook.

The Slippertons stood it pretty well for a time.

At first they were only mildly inconvenienced. Things used to disappear mysteriously, and turn up in unexpected places. Slipperton's pince-nez, for example, were lost, and found inside the piano. And Mrs. Slipperton's "false front" would be moved in the night from the dressing-table to the brass knob of the bed-post, even after she took to pinning it to the toilet cover. Things like that; irritating, but not really serious.

But the trouble increased, grew to be beyond endurance in the end. The poltergeists, with that lack of imagination which always characterises them, started to play the old trick of pulling off the Slippertons' bed-clothes in the middle of the night—one of the most annoying of the spirits' antics. And they followed that by experimenting with the heavy furniture.

I was out of England when the trouble came to a head, and I heard nothing of the later developments until after the Slippertons had left the house. I happened to meet Slipperton by accident in the Haymarket, and he took me into his club and gave me the whole story. Naturally, I was glad of the chance to investigate, although I thought it very probable that the phenomena would cease with the departure of the cook. I determined, however, to go down and spend a week in the house, alone. I was not dismayed by the fact that I should be unable to get any help with my domestic arrangements, owing to the superstitious fears of the villagers. I rather enjoyed cooking my own meals in those days.

It was fine weather in late May when I went

down, and I regarded the visit as a kind of holiday rather than as a serious investigation. Nevertheless, from force of habit I carried out my inquiry in the scientific spirit that is so absolutely essential in these matters. The Slippertons' house was on the outskirts of a small town in Buckinghamshire. The shell of the house dated from the early seventeenth century. (You will find it described in the *Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments*—the second volume of the Buckinghamshire survey.) But the inside had been gutted and replanned to suit our modern requirements, such as the need for making each bedroom accessible without passing through other bedrooms, the necessity for a fitted bathroom, and so on.

I found the house as Slipperton had warned me that I should, in a chaotic condition inside. Everything movable seemed to have been moved—without any definite intention, so far as I could see, but just for the sake of upsetting the decent order of the household. I found a frying-pan, for instance, hung on the hook that was designed for the dinner-gong, and the gong inside one of the beds. A complete set of bedroom ware had been arranged on the drawing-room table; and apparently some witticism had been contemplated with a chest of drawers, which had become firmly wedged into the angle of the back staircase. In short, the usual strange feats that characterise poltergeist phenomena.

I touched none of these misplaced things with the exception of the frying-pan, which I needed

to cook the sausages I had brought with me; but after I had had my meal, I went through all the rooms and entered the position of every article in a large note-book, making plans of each room, besides a full list of the furniture and ornaments it contained. Later, I went up into the roof and disconnected the water supply, afterwards emptying the cistern and all the pipes. And before I went to bed I turned off the electric light at the main switch. All these precautions, as I need hardly tell you, were absolutely essential. It might appear difficult to explain the moving of a large chest of drawers by the sound of water-pipes or the fusing of an electric wire; but the critics of psychical research have essayed far more difficult tasks than that, to their own entire satisfaction.

I went up to the bedroom the Slippertons used to occupy, a little before eleven o'clock. I had with me a couple of spare candles, a new note-book, and a fountain pen. I was even at that time, I may add, a highly trained researcher in every way, and was quite capable of taking a full shorthand report of a séance. I tried my pulse and temperature before getting into bed and found them both normal. So far, there had been no sign of any phenomena; and I was not at all nervous. Indeed, I may say that I have never been nervous with spirits.

I had brought the *Pickwick Papers* upstairs to read in bed—it is always as well to choose some book that has no kind of bearing on the subject of one's investigation—and I was in the middle of

the Trial Scene when my attention was caught by the sound of something moving in the room. I had left both windows wide open and the curtains undrawn, and I thought at first that an unusually large moth had flown in and was fluttering against the ceiling. I laid down my book, sat up and looked round the room, but I could see nothing. The night was very still, and the candle on the table by my bed burnt without a flicker. Nevertheless, the sound continued; a soft, irregular fluttering that suggested the intermittent struggle of some feeble winged creature. It occurred to me that a wounded bat or bird might have flown into the room and might be struggling on the floor out of sight near the foot of the bed. And I was about to get up and investigate when the flame of the candle sank a little, and I became aware that the temperature of the room was perceptibly colder.

I picked up my note-book at once and made an entry of the circumstances, and the exact time.

When I looked up again, the sound of fluttering had ceased and the candle was once more burning brightly; but I now perceived a kind of uncertain vagueness that was apparently trying to climb on to the rail at the foot of the bed. When I first saw it, it could not be described as a form. It had rather the effect of a patch of dark mist, with an irregular and changing outline, that obscured to a certain extent the furnishings of the room immediately behind it. I must confess, however, that my observations at this point were not so accurate as they should have been, owing to the sudden realisation of my stupidity in not having brought

a camera and flashlight apparatus. The Slippertons had prepared me for poltergeists, and I was, at that moment, distinctly annoyed at being confronted with what I presumed to be an entirely different class of phenomenon. Indeed, I was so annoyed that I was half inclined to blow out the candle and go to sleep. I wish, now, that I had. . . .

The Psychical Researcher paused and sighed deeply. Then producing a large note-book from his pocket, he continued, despondently :

I have got it all down here, and when I come to material that necessitates verbal accuracy, I should prefer to read my notes aloud rather than give an indefinite summary. In the first place, however, I must give you some idea of the form that gradually materialised ; of the form, that is, as I originally saw it.

It took the shape, I may say, of a smallish man, grotesquely pot-bellied, with very thin legs and arms. The eyes were disproportionately large and quite circular, with an expression that was at once both impish and pathetic. The ears were immense, and set at right angles to the head ; the rest of the features indefinite. He was dressed rather in the fashion of a mediæval page.

(The professor was heard to murmur, " The typical goblin," at this point, but made no further interruption.)

He sat with his feet crossed on the rail at the foot of the bed and appeared able to balance him-

self without difficulty. He had been sitting there for perhaps a couple of minutes, while I made various entries in my note-book before I tried the experiment of addressing him.

"Have you a message?" I asked. "If you cannot answer directly, knock once for 'No,' and three times for 'Yes,' and afterwards we can try the alphabet."

To my great surprise, however, he was able to use the direct voice. His tone was a trifle wheezy and thin at first, but afterwards gained power and clearness.

"I can hear you fairly well," he said. "Now do try to keep calm. It isn't often that one gets such a chance as this."

I will now read my notes.

MYSELF. "I am perfectly calm. Go on."

SPIRIT. "Will you try to answer my questions?"

The Researcher looked up from his note-book with a frown of impatience after reading these two entries, and said:

But perhaps I had better summarise our earlier conversation for you. There was, I may say, a somewhat long and distinctly complicated misunderstanding between myself and the spirit before the real interest of the message begins; a misunderstanding due to my complete misapprehension of our respective parts. You see, it is unhappily true—however much we may deplore the fact and try to guard against it—that even in psychical research we form habits of thought and method,

but particularly of thought. And I had got into the habit of regarding communications from spirits as referring to what we assume to be the future life. Well, this communication didn't. The spirit with whom I was talking had not, in short, ever been incarnated. He was what the Spiritualists and Theosophists, and so on, call an "Elemental." And to him, *I* represented the future state. I was, so to speak, the communicating spirit and he the psychical researcher. He was, I inferred, very far advanced on his own plane and expecting very shortly to "pass over," as he put it. Also, I gathered that he was in his own world by way of being an intellectual; keenly interested in the future—that is, in our *present* state; and that the Slipperton phenomena were entirely due to the experiments he had been carrying out ("on strictly scientific lines," he assured me) to try and ascertain the conditions of life on this plane.

Perhaps I can, now, illustrate his attitude by a few quotations from our conversation. For example:

SPIRIT. "Are you happy where you are?"

MYSELF. "Moderately. At times. Some of us are."

SPIRIT. "Are you yourself happy?"

MYSELF. "I may say so. Yes."

SPIRIT. "What do you do? Try and give me some idea of life on your plane."

MYSELF. "It varies so immensely with the individual and the set in which one lives. But we—oh! we have a great variety of what we call

'interests' and occupations, and most of us, of course, have to work for our livings."

SPIRIT. "I don't understand that. What are your livings, and how do you work for them?"

MYSELF. "We can't live without food, you see. We have to eat and drink and sleep; protect ourselves against heat and cold and the weather generally, which means clothes and shelter—garments to wear and houses to live in, that is."

SPIRIT. "I have inferred something of this very vaguely from my experiments. For instance, I gather that you put on hair in the daytime, and take it off when you are—where *you* are at the present time. Also, I have noticed that when the coverings which at present conceal you are pulled away, you invariably replace them. Am I to deduce from that that you try to keep your bodies warm and your heads cool at night?"

MYSELF. "Well, that's a trifle complicated. About the hair, you understand, some of us lose our hair—it comes out, we don't know why—in middle life, as mine has, and women and some men are rather ashamed of this and wear—er—other people's hair in the daytime to hide the defect."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

MYSELF. "Oh, vanity. We want to appear younger than we really are."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

The Researcher bent a little lower over his notebook as he said:

I seem to have written "Damnation" at this

point ; but so far as I can remember I did not speak the word aloud. You will see, however, that I tried my best to be patient in what were really the most exasperating circumstances. But I will miss the next page or two, and come to more interesting material. Ah ! here :

SPIRIT. " This thing you call death, or dying ? Am I to understand that it corresponds to what we call incarnation ? "

MYSELF. " We are not sure. Some of us believe that our actual bodies will rise again in the flesh ; others that the body perishes and the spirit survives in an uncertain state of which we have very little knowledge ; others, again, that death is the end of everything."

SPIRIT. " In brief, you know nothing whatever about it ? "

MYSELF. " Uncommonly little."

SPIRIT. " Do you remember your lives as elementals ? "

MYSELF (*definitely*). " No ! "

SPIRIT. " Then where do you suppose yourselves to begin ? "

MYSELF. " We don't know. There are various guesses. None of them particularly likely."

SPIRIT. " Such as ? "

MYSELF. " Oh, some of us believe that the soul or spirit is a special creation made by a higher power we call God, and breathed into the body at birth. And some that the soul or spirit, itself eternal, finds a temporary house in the body, and progresses from one to another with intervals between each incarnation."

SPIRIT. "Then this being born is what we should call dying?"

MYSELF. "Quite. It makes no difference. And, as a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of us—that is to say, all but about one in every million—never bother our heads where we came from, or what's likely to happen to us when we die, or are born, as you would call it."

I have a note here that after this we were both silent for about ten minutes.

SPIRIT (*despondently*). "I wish I could get some sort of idea what you do all the time and what you think about. I thought, when I so unexpectedly got into touch with someone in the future state, that I should be able to learn everything. And I have, so far, learnt nothing—absolutely nothing. In fact, except that I have been able to correct my inferences with regard to one or two purely material experiments, I may say that I know less now than I did before. And, by the way, those things over there—he pointed to the washstand—I noticed that at certain times you go through some ceremony with them upstairs, and as I wished to discover if there was any reason why you should not perform the same ceremony downstairs, I moved the things. Well, I noticed that the spirit who was here before you was apparently very annoyed. Can you give me any explanation of that?"

MYSELF. "Our bodies become soiled by contact with matter, and we wash ourselves in water. We prefer to do it in our bedrooms."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

MYSELF. "We use a certain set of rooms for one purpose and another set for other purposes."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

MYSELF. "I don't know why. We do."

SPIRIT. "But you are sure of the fact, even if you can give no reason?"

MYSELF. "Absolutely."

SPIRIT. "I wish I could prove that. One of my fellow-scientists, who has recently been able to press his investigations even further than I have up to the present time, has recently brought forward good evidence to prove that spirits are all black, wear no coverings on their bodies, live in the simplest of dwellings, and, although they have a few ceremonies, certainly have none which in any way corresponds to that you have just described."

MYSELF. "He has probably been investigating the habits of the Australian aborigines."

SPIRIT. "What are they?"

MYSELF. "Men, or, as you would say, spirits, like us in a few respects, but utterly different in most."

SPIRIT. "Have you ever seen them?"

MYSELF. "No."

SPIRIT. "Or met anyone who has?"

MYSELF. "No."

SPIRIT. "Then this account of them tallies with nothing in your experience."

MYSELF. "No, but they exist all right. There's no doubt of that."

SPIRIT. "I question it. In any case, I could not accept your word as evidence, seeing that you

have neither seen them yourself nor met with anyone who has."

And so on, you know (the Researcher muttered, flicking over the pages of his note-book).

He was infernally sceptical about those aborigines. It seems that he had had a tremendous argument with the other investigator about the possibility of "spirits" being black and naked, and he was dead set on proving that he had been right. I think, as a matter of fact, that what I said tended to confirm him in his theory. He put it that if there were such spirits on this plane, I must have seen them or have had some quite first-hand evidence of their existence; and when I said that I had seen black people, Indians, and so on, he cross-examined me until I got confused. You see, I had to confess that they weren't, strictly speaking, black, that they wore clothes, and washed, and lived in houses; and he got me involved in apparent contradictions—you have no idea how easy it is, when you are trying to be very lucid—and then he changed the subject with the remark that I was a very poor witness.

It was about this time that I began to lose my temper. It was after three o'clock when we got to that point, and I was getting very tired, and, strange as it may appear, curiously doubtful about my own existence. I had for some time been coming to the conclusion that he did not quite believe in my reality; and after he had dismissed my account of the black races as being untrustworthy, he said, half to himself, that quite probably I was nothing more than an hallucination, a thought pro-

jection of his own mind. And after that I got more and more annoyed—partly, I think, because I had a kind of haunting fear that what he had said might be true. When you have been talking to a spirit for over three hours in the middle of the night, you are liable to doubt anything.

But it was foolish of me to try and prove to him that I had a real objective existence, because obviously it wasn't possible. I tried to touch him, and my hand went through him as if he were nothing more than a patch of mist. Then I got right out of bed and moved various articles about the room, but, as he said, that proved nothing, for if he had an hallucination about me, he might equally well have one about the things I appeared to move. And then we drifted into a futile argument as to what I looked like.

It began as a sort of test, to try if my own conception of myself tallied with his; and it didn't—not in the very least. In fact, the description he gave of me would have done very well for the typical goblin of fairy-tale, which, as I told him, was precisely how *I* saw *him*. He laughed at that, and told me that, as a matter of fact, he had no shape at all, and that my conception of him proved his description of me was the correct one, because I had visualised myself. He said that he would appear to me in any shape that I happened to be thinking of, and naturally I should be thinking of my own. And I could not disprove a thing he said; and when I looked at myself in the cheval glass, I was not at all sure that I did not look like the traditional goblin.

Well, I assure you that I felt just then as if the one possible way left to demonstrate my sanity, my very existence, was to lose my temper; and I did it very thoroughly. I raved up and down the room, knocked the furniture about, chucked my boots through him, and called him a damned elemental. And although it had no more effect upon him than if I had been in another world—as I suppose in a sense I actually was—that outbreak did help to restore my sanity.

Perhaps you may have noticed that if a man is worsted in an argument he invariably loses his temper? It is the only means he has left to convince himself that he is right. Well, my temper did that for me on this occasion. I could not prove my existence to that confounded spirit by any logic or demonstration, but I could prove it to myself by getting angry. And I did.

The Researcher glared round the circle as if challenging anyone there to deny the validity of his existence, then slapped his note-book together and sat upon it.

I do not expect you to believe my story (he concluded, with a touch of vehemence). Indeed, I would much sooner that you did not believe it. I have been trying to doubt it myself for the past eleven years, and I still hope to succeed in that endeavour, aided by my intensive study of the comforting theories of the later Victorian scientists. But I must warn you that there was just one touch of what one might call evidence, beyond

my own impressions of that night—which may have been, and probably were, a mixture of telepathy, hallucination, expectancy, and auto-suggestion, that found expression in automatic writing.

This rather flimsy piece of evidence rests upon a conclusion drawn from the end of my conversation with the spirit. I was still banging about the room, then, and I said that I had finished with psychical research, that never again would I make the least inquiry with regard to a possible future life, or any kind of spiritualistic phenomenon. And, curiously enough, the poltergeist precisely echoed my resolve. He said that that night's experience had clearly shown him that the research was useless, that it could never prove anything, and that, even if it did, no one would believe it. *For if*, as he pointed out, *we who were in a manner of speaking face to face, were unable to prove our own existence to each other, how could we expect to prove the other's existence to anyone else?*

It was getting light then, and he faded out almost immediately afterwards.

But it is a fact that there were no more poltergeist phenomena in that house, although the Slippertons went back to it a month or two later and still have the same cook.

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